



This Close by Crowley's.Darling

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Romance, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, M. Brenner, OC

Pairings: J. Hopper/OC

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-01-18 11:32:29

Updated: 2019-08-28 17:12:51

Packaged: 2019-12-12 17:21:48

Rating: M

Chapters: 10

Words: 29,961

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Sequel to One Mississippi. After the tragedies in Julie's life she goes searching for answers and finds one Jim Hopper as Chief of Hawkins PD, harboring another test subject of Martin Brenner's. As she struggles to gain footing in a 'normal' life, Julie navigates how to cope with the guilt of how she escaped that lab and finds solace in the budding relationships she encounters.

1. Pyrrhic

November 1983

017. The numbers in black ink flashed in and out of shadows as the bus passed beneath bridges. Running a finger over the tattoo, she could remember when she got it done: bright room, Martin Brenner standing with his arms crossed in the doorway before he strode over and held her down. She'd learned his name; demanded it after she woke up back in that room again. He'd said the number was a way to identify her and she couldn't help but wonder if she would be killed soon.

Brenner spent more time with her upon her return, but there was no comfort in his company – not at first. The injections, the tests, the training. It was like she was his favorite experiment.

A chill ran down Julie's spine. The coat she'd stolen wasn't enough to warm her when the chills came from within. At least she was warmer than she'd been when she wandered through the woods.

The events of the last six hours had shaken her. Where she found the strength to do what she'd done, she hadn't known. It was like she didn't know who she was anymore. That young naïve girl had been twisted into someone she couldn't even stand to look at.

Flirting with a man to buy her a bus ticket was easy enough, but she'd have to keep doing it each stop until she made it to Mississippi.

Home.

Her sister, Toni, was killed by these men; by this project. She had so many unanswered questions, but she'd rest easy in her own bed. It blew her mind that she'd escaped for the third time. What did people always say? Third time's the charm? But this time was different. This time it was mental manipulation; a long stretch of a plan that she felt guilty over now. Maybe the guilt would keep her up at night, but maybe time would heal those wounds too. She should have taken the car; dragged his body out of the driver's seat, took off. But instead she ran through the woods in the middle of the night once again, fearing

the car would be traceable.

This time she had a plan: get normal looking clothes. Blend in. Avoid the police. Get a bus ticket. Get home. Let her destiny be in her own hands for once.

The bus wasn't helping her nerves; with every stranger that passed she worried they worked for Brenner – for *whoever* they were. But there was a gun in the pocket of her stolen jacket, she had on sexy stolen undergarments, and if she needed to seduce someone to get home – God damn it – she'd do it. Wouldn't be the first time...

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The seduction idea wasn't necessary this time, as it turned out. She'd run into some very kind people and hadn't had to use the gun once. Yet.

Upon stepping foot into Mississippi, she knew to thumb for a ride. A gentle woman in her 40s picked her up, asked her story. Julie spouted some lie about how she was a college student and her car died.

Only having a 'thank you' and a warm smile to give the woman, she got out of the car and planted her feet on her family's street for the first time in a year and ten months.

Julie didn't want to knock. It just wasn't normal not having a key to her own home. She did it anyway, holding her breath until someone opened up. Lightheaded, she grabbed onto the doorframe and stared eye-to-eye with her aunt Kathy.

"Julie?" the tears that followed were not expected, but Julie held her aunt in her arms and let her cry. "I'm so sorry."

Sorry?

So that was it then. Her parents were dead. She just knew in her gut, knew by her aunt's reaction, felt it under her skin.

"They're gone?" she asked as she closed her eyes, tears already falling.

She focused on the way Brenner worked with her to tap into the power she had and the memories flooded to her. She felt the energy transfer from Kathy through her fingertips and into her veins. Her mother and father – bloody – in the car, front end smashed, small fire starting. Sirens were heard, but she could tell they were already gone.

Gaspings, she felt tearstains rushing down her cheeks. Aunt Kathy still clung to her but soon ushered her inside and locked the door.

"The accident was fifteen months ago," Kathy had apparently been counting. "Just an unfortunate thing, same as Toni."

She knew that couldn't be the truth. There were no *coincidences* in her life anymore. Fifteen months was how long she'd been in the lab since her last escape. The timelines between Toni's death and her parents matched up all too closely and Julie couldn't shake the feeling that this was no accident. There was no doubt in her mind; these people had killed her parents.

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The bad news kept coming and she felt like she was drowning in grief.

Aunt Kathy had bone cancer.

Grief stayed longer than she'd expected. Most days she didn't even get out of bed; just lay there, staring at the stucco ceiling, feeling how heavy everything felt. She'd break down every few hours – long sobs clawing their way out of her mouth, screaming into the pillow, gasping for breath.

Maybe she should get some help, she thought.

But there was still beauty in being free. On her best days, she sat on the front porch for every meal, enjoying whatever weather Mississippi had to offer that day. The breeze in her hair, the sunlight through the leaves of the tree in the front yard; it all felt surreal. How many weeks had she spent wishing for a sunset again? That windowless room was psychological torture. Julie never enjoyed

nature as much as she did now.

And as the grief passed and returned in waves, she found ways to distract herself. Her childhood home was a mess because Aunt Kathy had inherited it and was in too much pain to clean.

For weeks she tidied up the house and went through old stuff. When she was feeling her best, she started cooking meals again, taking care of her aunt. But she was always moving – she had to keep her hands busy or she'd lose her nerve to steady the anger that the grief left over.

She could kill for her parents. It was a thought. Instead, she'd gotten a job at the nearest coffee shop because she was terrified of time with her thoughts; terrified of the things she could do.

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Time seemed to go so quick when she was busy every day. The days at the facility were so slow with her in that room or being worked on and trained. The first few months Julie was home, she went straight to and from work and only changed path to grocery shop.

Call it fear, maybe. But she couldn't bring herself to meet anyone new or talk to old friends. Who knew if they were spies. Who knew who worked for Brenner. Nothing at home felt safe anymore.

It was six months and three weeks before she took a seat on that barstool again. That bartender she was interested in a lifetime ago didn't work there anymore she figured and instead a beautiful blonde woman took his place.

It didn't matter. She wasn't interested in dating anymore. Her life had become mundane but she wasn't driven to change anything. The less that changed, the less she had to worry about anyone shady coming in to harm her. In a way, she found comfort in the expected.

And then Aunt Kathy's health worsened; her cancer had spread once again - this time to her lungs. The doctor didn't give her very long, what with the chemotherapy being too expensive.

"I can find a way to pay for it," Julie had demanded. She'd lost count

of how many times they'd had that conversation.

And every time, her Aunt would calmly shake her head. "I've done my time here. You're all I've got to live for. Keep your money. Get out of this place."

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Six months was more than the doctors had expected Aunt Kathy to push through, but she'd insisted on sticking around as long as she could to make sure Julie was set up with money – she was stubborn, as were all women in her family. She'd set up selling the house to a family friend upon her death.

Those six months weren't the hardest part of Julie's life, but it still hurt to see her Aunt in so much pain. The day she came home from the coffee shop to find her unresponsive in her bed, she felt like the world was caving in once again. A similar feeling had washed over her sitting in the passenger seat next to that cop while her sister's car was smashed.

She had no one and the man who was willing to buy her family's home would be calling within the week.

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Jude Kalhan, 45, white, divorced, residing in Chicago now. The police report mentioned out-of-state plates in the car "accident" that had killed her parents.

With the house sold, Julie was out a home so a road trip to Chicago wasn't out of the question. Sure, hopping from hotel room to hotel room wasn't her ideal situation but with the uncertainty of her safety, she knew it was something she had to do. With her Aunt gone, she had *nothing*.

Brenner was pronounced dead she'd found out after calling around in Indiana a few weeks previously. With nothing to occupy her time, she suddenly got curious again – wanted to dig a little – give her life a purpose again.

The secretary in Hawkins Police Department had been very helpful

and she was going to call back again more than likely. If Julie remembered correctly, her name was Flo and she'd seemed happy to speak to someone; said that before recently things had been slow.

However, now she had a mission and so she was Chicago-bound.

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Driving in Chicago was pretty crazy. Her goal was to get in, get information, and get out. Finding Jude's address was easy but that gun felt heavy in her pocket as she climbed stairs to his apartment. She wore a low-cut top, her goal to get him to let her in before killing him. Don't touch anything. Move quick.

When she got there, she used her shoe to kick the door and draw Jude's attention to her. It worked. She was staring at the face of her parent's killer.

"Hi," she squeaked out. "Could I use your phone?"

He paused, looking her over, but finally agreeing to let her in. The door closed behind her and he pointed to his phone on the wall. The television was on and he was drinking a beer, unaware that Julie had pulled a gun out of her jacket pocket.

"Were you paid to kill my parents?" she asked, unafraid.

Jude slowly stood, turning to her, smirking. "Thought you looked familiar. You look like your mother, Julie."

She pushed down the memories. "Did Brenner hire you?"

He laughed, nodding. "I knew this day would come. Just wait till Brenner finds out you're here."

"Brenner's dead."

Jude shrugged. "If you think so."

The room suddenly felt cold as that sentence sunk in.

The door opened and Julie stood still, breath caught in her throat.

Was it an ambush? Was it Brenner?

The people that entered wore masks. The leader stepped forward at the sight of Julie with a gun aimed at Jude's head. She aimed her gun at Jude too and Julie stilled. She raised her mask; she was a teenager.

"And what do we have here?" she had an accent. The others went to raid Jude's apartment, digging around for his wallet, grabbing him around the neck and pulling him to his knees.

"Look, I'm only here for him," Julie stated.

"Well, so are we," the girl stepped closer and Julie moved her aim toward the girl. A flash of memories rushed through her and her eyes fell to the girl's wrist. In an instant she saw the numbers 008 tattooed there.

"Wait," she lowered her gun, revealed the tattoo on her wrist as well.

"Seventeen," the girl, Eight, said. "You're...part of all of this?"

"He killed my parents," Julie informed her. "And he says Brenner is still alive."

The girl was quiet for a minute, nodding slowly. "Then here," she motioned her group to bring the man closer. "Your turn."

Julie flinched even though she hadn't expected to. She wanted to be brave, ignore the fear in her gut, kill him without a second glance as he likely did when he crashed his car into her parents. But it took a few too many seconds and she almost lost her nerve. Then a flash of his memory – him walking away from that car wreck – filled her mind and she pulled that trigger, hearing a thud as his body hit the floor.

She glanced around the room before lowering the gun.

Eight told her that her name was Kali, explained that her powers allowed her to make people see things. Her mission had been to find everyone involved in the lab, the project, and 'give them what was coming to them.' Her team took care of the body and probably stole from him while they left the scene.

"And you were taken when you were 24?" Kali asked to which Julie nodded. "You said Brenner spent time with you often." Her fingers moved and Julie was distracted for a moment. "What did he do, I wonder?"

Glancing up, Julie saw him – Martin – standing a few feet away from her, walking slowly forward, hands in pockets.

"There's my little bird," he cooed, smile coming to his lips, bloodied mark on his forehead. "I have been looking for you. Why have you left me? I need you."

He was inches from her in a moment, pressing his mouth to hers without permission. Julie struggled against him, screaming as she pulled away, but his hands were on her again and it felt so real.

Just as soon as he appeared, he was gone and Kali was staring curiously. Julie bit her tongue, remembering the powers she said she had.

"So it's like that then," Kali hummed, nodding.

"It's not like I asked for it," Julie defended. "After they dragged me back, I was determined to get out for good. They killed my sister. So I complied when I could, made him think I was attracted to him; seduced him," a chill ran through her, admitting it aloud for the first time. She wanted to vomit. She bit her tongue.

"I met another one of us recently," Kali mumbled. "She and Brenner were closer than he and I. Not in the same way as you." She looked her up and down.

"Another...experiment?" Julie still didn't know what to call all this.

Kali nodded. "She chickened out of joining us. Couldn't kill. Took a bus home when things got tough," she rolled her eyes and Julie was reminded of her age.

"Any idea where she lived?"

Kali shrugged. "Didn't ask. She left in the middle of a shit storm. Said she was going home to her police officer."

Julie grabbed her keys, walking toward her car with her bags of clothes and possessions in the trunk. Kali followed behind, jogging closer.

"Well, it's been great. Thanks for distracting him I guess."

"You said you can give and get memories," Kali said. "You could be useful here. You could help us."

"Pass," Julie shook her head, getting in her car.

"Where are you going?"

"To find that lab. See that it's actually closed for good."

Kali sighed, crossing her arms. "You have no clue where it is, do you?"

"A vague idea," Julie snapped. "But it's in the paper and I'm sure I'll find someone who knows something."

Kali nodded. "Good luck." Julie closed the door, started the car, rolled down the window. "Hawkins," Kali informed her. "The lab was in Indiana."

2. Hiraeth

All those hours of driving, Julie didn't want to get in her car ever again. Her legs were stiff and she was reminded of that stunt she'd pulled with that police officer, Jim; reminded of crappy gas station food and aching limbs from driving for days.

He was surely dead. They'd killed her sister and her parents. They had Jim. It was her fault he'd been killed. She thought about it often and the guilt ate at her most nights. If she would have just stayed in that place, not run, so many people would still be living.

She made an effort to shake off these thoughts, though, and that morning was no different. Julie forced herself to talk to people even though she wanted nothing to do with them. These people and this town meant nothing to her; nowhere did, really. But she knew she had to try to lead a normal life and a part of her was almost giddy over the thought of having somewhere to call *home*.

She'd been running on pure adrenaline and was currently in need of coffee. The coffee shop by the motel was near empty but she went anyway. Glancing around, she found a family of three; a little girl staring unhappily at her pancakes. Suddenly she remembered Kali's mention of another girl like them – how she'd traveled back home to a police officer.

Something felt peculiar and she always trusted her gut.

"Excuse me," she waved over the barista. "Do you have a phone I could use?"

In her purse there was a balled up piece of paper with the number to Hawkins Police scribbled on it. Flo was extremely helpful with her questions about the lab a few weeks back.

"Hello?"

"Hi, I have a quick question: is there an officer named Jim there?"

A sigh left the woman. "What'd he do now?"

Julie's heart jolted – he wasn't dead! Or was it another Jim...?

"Nothing. Is he in now? Can I speak with him?"

"He's running late – as usual. We never know when he'll drag his lazy ass in here, but I'm sure he'll show up before noon."

It couldn't be the same man. The Jim she remembered had been so eager for her case, so ready to jump in and help when no one else was there for her.

"Okay, thank you."

She hung up the phone, tipped the barista, and left the coffee shop.

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Julie sat in a chair pushed to the corner of the room, eyes fixated on the door, almost urging it to open. Taking even breaths she ignored Flo's stares of curiosity. It was interesting to put a face to the voice over the phone line.

For fifteen minutes she'd had the urge to leave. She'd known Jim for only a matter of a few days and even though he was an important part of her past, maybe he'd been unfazed. Maybe he wouldn't recognize her. Maybe this was a terrible decision.

But she had to know what he knew about the lab. He had to be chasing down leads, right? Just happening to be the chief *here* of all places?

What if he was a part of all of this? Hired by Brenner to capture her, convince her she was safe, and then lead her right to them? If Brenner was still alive – like that dead man had said – could Jim be working with him currently?

Her eyes snapped to the door as soon as it opened and her stomach dropped.

The one officer – Powell, was it? – made a noise in the back of his throat, commenting on the chief's lateness.

"Hop," Flo started.

"Honestly, let me get some coffee, Flo – we've been over this," his voice boomed.

"Someone's here to see you," Flo ignored him, pointing to their guest.
"Name's Julie Preston."

Jim was about to raise his voice but stopped, mouth agape. Julie stood, shifting her purse from her lap to her shoulder.

"Hi, Jim," she spoke finally.

He paused, closed his mouth, exhaled through his nostrils.

"Hey," he cleared his throat and then pointed down the hall to what she assumed was his office. "Come in."

...

Chief, she thought as they sat in silence. He'd said he wanted another job but it was surprising to see him so high ranking, especially if he was lazy like Flo made it seem. Jim lit a cigarette and stared at his desk for a moment.

"I thought for sure you were–"

"Dead?" she nodded, a flood of memories – Jim's memories – clicked in her mind. "Same to you..." she paused awkwardly. "You looked for me."

"Uh...yeah. How'd you–" he paused, sighing then rubbing his temples. "Right." She wanted to tell him about what else she was capable of, but his questions started first. "It was here, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"That lab they had you at."

She nodded. "Brenner. All of that power company crap was bullshit. I read it all in the papers after–"

Jim held up his hand, stopping her before she could continue. "It's a long story, but I know everything."

"Wait," she interrupted too, extending her hand toward his on his desk. "I...learned something..." he gave her a look. "May I?" she nodded toward his hand. A second's pause but he nodded curtly.

Closing her eyes, Julie pressed her fingertips to the back of Jim's hand. What came next was a flood of Jim's memories: a crying, desperate woman, a missing son, a monster in the walls, the *lab*, Brenner, a different world, a little girl with abilities, a cabin, Eggos in the fridge.

Jim pulled away then but some memories were still coming. Julie opened her eyes to stop them.

"What the Hell was *that*?"

"Brenner trained me, kept working on my mind," it was weird to say aloud. "Jim, I can access people's memories."

Jim said nothing, mostly freaked out about what she saw. He felt sick, almost, like she'd taken away his privacy and now knew about Jane.

"How'd you get out? I looked for you when I was there." That guilt suddenly found its way back.

Julie bit her tongue. "I did something awful," she left it at that for now, suddenly unable to own up to what she'd done. What would Jim think? "Story for another time?" she offered, still wondering if she could trust him. "I went home. Jim, they killed my parents. A car accident—" she paused, looking up at him in an attempt to stop the tears from forming.

"M'sorry," he huffed, shaking his head at the thought of the damage.

"Can I try something?" leaning forward and across the desk, she pressed her fingers to Jim's neck, feeling his pulse. It quickened. He wanted to pull away but remained silent.

It wasn't the first time she'd tried this. Brenner had forced her to

share a memory – the same way – and it was way too intimate for her comfort.

The feeling of memories flooding to Jim was like a rush – little peppering of tingles in the veins on her arms. She showed him everything from the moment she got home: her aunt, the accident report, the man she chased to Chicago - how she had to kill him.

She wiped the drip of blood from her nose, grabbing a tissue from Jim's desk. This was the only power that the blood still came from.

Jim was breathless when she pulled away. His pupils were small, shock plastered across his face.

"Jesus..." he narrowed his eyes at her.

"I'm sorry, I just figured that would be easier," but before she sat back in her chair, Jim grabbed her wrist and pulled up the sleeve of her jacket.

For some reason he'd expected to find nothing – that this was some elaborate ruse – but there was the tattoo and now he knew her number: *seventeen*. He raised his eyes to her but said nothing, still trying to get over the feeling of her using her powers on him. She pulled away, sat back, stared unblinking at him. She felt exposed now, having Jim reveal this without her permission. But after all he'd done for her she figured she owed him that bit of exposure at least.

"And now you're back here?" Jim wasn't trying to get mean with her, but he felt like things were just getting settled around here: his life was finally flat lining again and now here she was to bring more weirdness to this town. For God's sake, she'd *given him memories* as if this was normal.

"I wanted to see if the lab was still standing," she shrugged.

"It is," he snapped. "Kids got that news story out about Barb," she nodded at this, having read it. "Got 'em outta here."

"Good. And Brenner?"

"Dead."

"You're sure?"

"Well...yeah. Pretty sure." At Jim's words, Julie stilled. Hopper connected the dots. "That was him, wasn't it? The one who took you back that day."

Julie nodded, not wanting to give him those memories. His scent and his mouth – the weight of him in that bed. How he'd call her '*little bird*,' keep her company because "she was his favorite." She breathed sharply at the memory.

"That girl," Julie gaped. "With the dark hair – the powers," Jim's eyes darkened. "Was she...like me?"

Gruffly, Jim answered a short, "Yes."

He was trying to hide something from her and a part of her didn't want to push him, but she needed to know.

"Where is she?"

Jim bit his tongue. Sure, they shared a history – a few days mind you – but she was practically a stranger still. And how was he certain she wasn't working with them still? He had to protect Jane.

"I don't know."

"Bull," she slammed her hand on the desk. He didn't flinch, just leveled his gaze with hers. She sensed his anger and hesitation. Though she understood, she couldn't help but feel hurt. "I get it, okay? It's your job – to protect. And, yeah, you could have me pinned in ten seconds, but don't you dare doubt that I can't make a skin connection and read your memories. I can. But I won't." She lowered her gaze a moment, took a breath and Jim felt himself let out a breath he didn't know he held. "You know where she is," she lowered her voice. "I want to keep her away from these people – if there's a possibility of them coming back here. I would *never* side with them, Jim, not after everything they've taken from me."

"Julie..." Jim shook his head, sighed, "Look, it's not that I don't trust you, it's just...there's been a lot going on these past two years, okay? And now you're here and..."

"-And you think I just brought more shit your way," she nodded at that. "I get it." She felt like such a fool, driving all this way to see some empty lab. "I shouldn't have come here. I'm sorry." She stood to leave.

"Where are you going?" he groaned.

"Tomorrow I'll go check out that lab and then I'll leave you alone."

Jim stared at her. "You plan on going alone?"

"Yes," she snapped.

He pulled out his pack of cigarettes, lit one, inhaled deeply. "What time?" Julie turned to him, unspeaking. "How about noon tomorrow?"

"Jim-"

"I'll pick you up. Where are you staying?"

Julie didn't know if the feeling stirring in her chest was hope or dread.

3. Refrain

Of all the thoughts that circled around in Julie's mind that morning, the most prominent was: Jim Hopper had a habit of running late.

It wasn't a big deal, really, but every minute that passed made her extremely aware that this situation was *awkward*. Why she ran to him after finding out he was local, she had to do some soul searching. Was it because she was attracted to him and those two nights they spent together all that time ago hooked her in? She decided that no, that wasn't the case – she simply had *no one else* to go to and so she figured he was a good bet.

But her mind still raced. After this was all said and done, when she found that empty lab, what would she do next? With no one to chase down, no other investigations, no job, no family...

Jim's memories had connected things for her – cleared up some gray areas. However, she was still convinced that this wasn't over. She couldn't go back home – if there were still employees out there they'd find her fast. But staying in this crappy motel room wasn't an option either.

Someone pulled up outside of the motel and a car horn sounded twice. Glancing out the window, she saw Jim's truck. Such a gentleman. She took a deep breath before walking out the door.

Jim couldn't help but notice how she dressed. Now that she wasn't forced to borrow clothes from Jim's friend's girlfriends or wear what she had on from the lab, Jim liked how she dressed. He wondered if they were from her suitcase from home – wherever she called home – Mississippi, was it?

"Hi," she greeted as she got in his truck.

"Hey," he nodded before throwing it into gear and peeling out of the parking lot.

It felt strange having her in the passenger seat once again. It felt like a decade ago that he was crossing state lines to get her home, when it

was – what – two, three years? It was a strange feeling, really, having another encounter with her. Weren't people typically expected to catch up after a few years? Had they really even *known* each other before? To Hopper, this felt like the strangest hookup run-in he'd ever had.

Yet it wasn't *awful*.

Unless she brought those fuckers back to Hawkins...

"Thank you for taking me," she finally spoke. Her voice was soft as she stared out the window in fear of making eye contact with him.

He grunted. "You really wanna do this?"

"No," she answered immediately. He glanced at her and she returned the gaze just to break it once again. "But I have to. I need...closure, almost, I think?"

Jim nodded and she was comforted by the understanding. "Makes sense."

"You don't have to do this; I can go myself. I didn't want to take you away from work."

He glanced at her again, "You really wanna go alone?" Julie remained silent. "Look, I didn't bring anything to get in, say those doors are bolted, okay? Trust me when I tell ya: a walk around outside will prove it to you." A few minutes passed in silence and Julie stared out at the trees blurring by. She wondered if these were the woods she got lost in on her escape. "This place was heavily guarded."

Her big doe eyes took him in as he pulled down the drive that led to the lab. As it came into view, he slowed the truck and watched her reaction. Her chest rose and fell quickly as her breathing hitched.

"Jim..." she spoke in a warning tone, pulling her legs up to the seat with her eyes wide. "*Jim!*"

He glanced back at the empty parking lot, wondering if he missed something. What did she see?

"Hey, *hey!*" he threw the truck in park, attempted to calm her sudden thrashing. As she tried to get away her nails dug into his wrist and he pulled away sharply. "*Jesus! Stop!*" With a touch he felt a shock; a vision of a full parking lot coming into his mind, then the view from a balcony. He blinked and it was gone. "Julie, calm down!" he held her shoulders now. "It's okay! No one's here."

Her breathing slowed as she slowly opened her eyes, noting the abandoned lot. She'd thought this was it: figured she'd been right yesterday: that Jim was working for them, he was taking her back. But the lot was empty and nothing looked the way it had when she'd escaped; no lights on, no guards, no cars...

Jim was telling the truth.

"I'm sorry," she choked out, hanging her head. "I thought I saw..."

Jim was still getting used to this new ability: that she could *transfer memories with her touch* – what the Hell?!

"I...saw it. You-" He didn't have the words. *Shared it?* He sighed. "Julie, you gotta believe me." She said nothing. "Let's walk." He gave her a second and then shut off the car, stepping out.

Julie was tentative as she walked alongside Jim. He took her to the entryway, stayed back a bit so she didn't feel cornered as she ran a hand along the bolts on the doors. Jim's memories were screaming in her ears: something about hideous dog creatures and a monster underground. She didn't want to know. Not now.

Her chest felt tight as she lifted her hands to peer into the darkened room. She half expected to see Martin Brenner peering back at her, but nothing inside moved. The view down the main hall brought memories flooding back to her in waves:

She remembered sitting staring at the plate before her. "*This is what you requested, correct?*" Brenner spoke finally. She nodded. "Good."

What was the catch, she wondered. Yet of course she ate it, practically moaning at the taste. Brenner didn't leave. The whole situation seemed

foreign to her. He hadn't paid her a visit since she'd been brought back, when she'd demanded he tell her his name so she knew who to curse.

When she finished eating, Brenner called someone in to take the plate. He returned to the chair, sitting simply, looking relaxed. He was staring at her, hands pressed together in front of his mouth like a prayer. Julie looked directly at him.

"What are you thinking, I wonder."

Julie answered instantly. "Wondering if I could overpower you. How many guards are positioned outside that door?"

Brenner blinked slowly, a soft smile coming to his lips. "I've missed that spark." He rested his hands on his lap. "You're unhappy here."

"You think?"

He hesitated. "We're going to start doing things differently. Would you like that?"

"I'd like for you to let me go."

Brenner shook his head. "I'm afraid we can't do that yet."

He was probably giving her false hope, but she clung to that word – 'yet'. If she obliged, would they let her go? Her perspective changed.

"So, what, I bitch about wanting a burger and fries, you bring it for me? What do I owe you in return?"

Brenner pursed his lips. "We want to push your powers – see what else you're capable of."

"There's something else," she sensed it. "Tell me."

He nodded solemnly then spoke loudly. "Bring it in."

A man pushed a cart into the room. He nodded at her, "Seventeen," he'd said it in almost a greeting. He picked up a strange contraption – pressing a button to make it buzz. Julie glanced over at Brenner who slowly stood, grabbing her left wrist and pulling it behind her back as he took a seat

behind her.

"This will only hurt for a moment, little bird. And then things change," he hummed into her ear.

The other man grabbed her right arm, stamping something on her skin. She saw "017" then realized what the buzzing thing was. Pulling back, she felt her heartrate increase.

"No, stop. Don't," she begged. The man started tattooing, a stinging pain coursing through her arm. "You bastard," she cussed at Brenner.

He looked genuinely pained at her retort. "I assure you this, Julie, I'm only doing this to keep it consistent."

"Consistent!?"

He nodded. "The others have one too."

Others? Julie wanted to vomit.

"You alright?" Jim called from behind her and she pulled away from the window quickly, trying to shake the feeling of the memory. She nodded at him but he wasn't convinced. "This is too much. Let's go."

As they walked back to the truck, Julie saw the balcony out of the corner of her eye, but she jogged closer to Jim, pushing those memories away. She wasn't ready to go there yet; she couldn't let those thoughts consume her, not now.

They got in the truck and Jim just sat there a moment, pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

"I'm sorry," Julie spoke quietly.

*"Sorry?" Jim repeated. "What the Hell do you have to be *sorry* for?" she remained silent. Jim tried to get rid of the gruff edge to his tone. "Okay, so what now?" Julie just looked at him blankly. "You're just gonna stay in that shitty motel and...and?"*

She hadn't really thought that far ahead; being so convinced that

something was going to turn up when they arrived: that some creature would pop out of the lab or some Suit would take her away again. Yet there she was, back in the truck with the man who'd crossed state lines to get her home. Where was '*home*' now, she wondered.

"I'm not really sure, Jim. I...I really have nowhere to go so," she shrugged. "I guess I can go anywhere." She paused. "There was another...experiment I met in Chicago...I could always..." she trailed off.

Jim focused his eyes on her. All the responsibility he had at the moment: Jane, the department, the paperwork piled on his desk...he wondered what it would be like to feel that sense of freedom. Yet, he wondered if she felt free at all. He knew that he was always looking over his shoulder; constantly convinced that someone was going to come for Jane. He imagined Julie felt similarly. What was freedom when the government had you kidnapped and tested on?

Hopper sighed heavily. "I'll see what I can do."

A look of confusion crossed her face. "What? You mean stay?"

Jim stared back at her, jaw clenching and unclenching as he contemplated if he really wanted to say what he was about to say, but she probably already read it from him.

"There's someone else," he spoke apprehensively. "Eleven."

It struck her then, what Kali was talking about: *"She left in the middle of a shit storm. Said she was going home to her police officer."*

Hopper didn't need her powers to know the look of recognition on her face. He cringed. Was he doing the right thing?

"You know where she is," Julie spoke.

"Uhhh..."

"Is she *safe*?"

This stopped Jim right in his tracks. "Yes."

Julie sat back in the seat, look contemplative. Jim was blocking her, being guarded for a good reason. She didn't want to push and make that skin contact to read him. She trusted that whatever happened was the right thing. She let out a sigh.

"If she's here, she could use protection – another pair of eyes on her. I understand if you still don't trust me, but I need to know if she's got this...this *feeling* too." Jim looked at her. "That things aren't over...I can't shake the thought."

Hopper wanted to vomit.

4. Impel

"I think I got somethin' for ya..." Jim's voice sounded deep and exhausted over the phone.

Julie was still staying in the motel, trying to keep busy but going stir crazy pretty quickly.

"Oh?" she hummed, placing down the container for the takeout she'd ordered.

"Yeah, uh..." he seemed distracted so Julie waited – what else did she have to do? Voices were muffled on the other line and then Jim's voice was too, as if he'd pressed the receiver to his chest, yet she could still hear him when he said, "Fuck you, go to Hell." Considering this was the first conversation they were having since he'd dropped her off after the visit to the lab, it was pretty comical. "Hey, sorry. Been crazy here. I think I dug up something for rent. Friend-of-a-friend thing. Interested?"

"I dunno, this motel is very spacious and modestly decorated. Not sure I could part with it," she retorted.

"S'that right?" his voice was humored. "Well, if you can break away from your dream home long enough to check this place out, I can get you in to see it."

"That would be great, Jim, thank you."

Hop inhaled a drag of his cigarette, cracked his neck, and exhaled. "Got a pen or somethin'?" he waited for a moment for her. "I'm gonna have you call Joyce Byers – she's the cousin of the woman renting the place out. She'll take ya through."

He gave her Joyce's number, hoping Julie didn't ask what he'd told Joyce about her. The answer would be 'enough' but he knew Julie would push. Joyce was always out to help him when he needed her, what with the situation with Will, but you better believe she'd ask questions. Hop didn't have answers. Not yet, anyway.

Yet two days ago when he asked Joyce about the house for rent, Joyce asked who it was for. So he'd given Julie's name, hoped that was enough. Of course it wasn't. Of course Joyce asked how he knew her and of course he was obligated to give her *something*.

"Long story. Maybe she can tell you," he'd said.

"That's bull, Hop. How do you know this girl?" Joyce had been all too curious when he mentioned a new name around this small town. A girl without a home? What was he, some kind of philanthropist?

"Well, I don't really know her, know her..." She'd given him that look and he'd rolled his eyes and sighed. "I'd just...helped her before, okay? And it kinda got fucked up and...I dunno, I guess I'm..." He'd almost said 'responsible' but he'd bit his tongue.

Joyce knew she could push him, but she also knew when to stop.

Julie's voice called him out of his memory from the other day.

"Thank you again, Jim. I feel so stupid for coming to you, but I'm glad I did."

Hop put out his cigarette, sucked on the spot on his finger he'd just burned with the ashes. "Yeah, kid, no problem. But you owe me a beer."

She laughed. "Done."

He hung up after that, grabbed his hat and keys, and went back to work.

...

Joyce Byers sounded nice over the phone, Julie thought. Maybe a little too eager and kinda scattered but nice.

She'd agreed to meet Julie at the house the next day and it was nice to have plans for once. Julie was ready to figure out her next steps after spending so much time in limbo. Through her excitement, she couldn't help but feel anxious. All that time in the facility planning her escape, dreaming about her future life she never expected to be

in small-town Hawkins. Yet she felt drawn here, almost, as if she couldn't leave.

The house was a little blue thing on a street called Habershan and it didn't look as run-down as her mind had made up. Julie parked behind the Ford Pinto in the drive and she saw a petite woman leaned against it, sizing her up just as much as she was.

When she got out of the car Joyce instantly introduced herself and – to Julie's disdain – extended her hand to shake. She wanted to be polite, though she hesitated.

The skin contact sent Julie's mind into overdrive – flashes of memories of a lost son, a monster in the walls, Jim beating the chest of a little pale almost-corpse. More connections were made. *Will*. This was the woman from some of Jim's memories too. *Friend-of-a-friend*, he'd said.

The feeling of cold and empty didn't leave her skin until she shoved her hands in her pockets.

"This is my cousin's property. Her last tenant moved out a few months ago. Come on in."

The front porch creaked as the two of them climbed to the front door. Joyce started going on about how many bedrooms and the possibilities of the home, how her cousin didn't mind if she wanted to paint and decorate however she wanted. All of this information processed for Julie, but her eye caught chips in the paint that almost looked like fingernail marks. A blink and she was taken back to a memory: skin and sweat, a dark freckle on his shoulder, how he'd loved when she'd dig her nails into that spot, pepper kisses over the marks.

Her throat felt tight. She blinked away the memory, breathed, and it was gone just as quickly as it came.

"-And this *kitchen*...!" Joyce was still going on about what a quality home this place was.

Honestly, Julie didn't need convincing. She'd agreed to see it because

Jim had gone out of his way to make this happen for her and she was grateful. Any place she could call 'home' for a while was better than some shitty motel room.

"I love it," she told Joyce mostly so she didn't have to hear her go on anymore.

"Really?!" Joyce seemed too happy about this. "Linda said that if you want it, you can move in right away. I can give you her number so you can call about rent. How soon do you think you can get a moving truck?"

Julie smiled sadly. "Oh, I...uh...I don't really have anything but a few suitcases and little stuff I could fit in my car."

Joyce's face fell. "Oh, honey, that just won't do. I-I'm sure I have some stuff the boys and I can get rid of. I mean, kitchen stuff is here and a bed and couch but..."

"I'll make it work, Joyce, no worries. You've done enough for me already. Thank you."

Joyce nodded, but her eyes still looked contemplative. "So you're moving in?"

"I paid at the motel through tonight and my stuff's there, but – yes – I can whenever."

Joyce hugged her and Julie felt herself tense up, closing her eyes to push out the memories. She built that wall quickly in her mind, just the way Brenner and her had practiced. Nothing got in, just the cold in her fingertips.

"This calls for a celebration! Let's go kick through my old junk and have a glass of wine."

Julie agreed because Joyce was just too eager and kind (and she felt guilty if she'd said no), but also because she craved human interaction.

...

"So how did you and Hop meet?" Joyce's voice was muffled from a different room as she dug out yet another box for them to go through.

Julie sipped her wine, contemplating if she should tell Joyce the truth or not. Clearly she'd been through some shit with Brenner. But Julie wasn't feeling courageous enough tonight to bring herself to talk openly.

"We met a few years ago before he was chief here. I needed help finding my sister." *Don't think, don't think, don't think.*

"Hop's good at finding."

Julie breathed evenly though it took some control. "He is."

"Did you find her?"

"Yeah," Julie choked out, looking anywhere but at Joyce's reaction to her words. She took a hefty gulp of wine this time.

Joyce didn't push.

Julie sensed movement outside the front door. She kept her expression neutral so as not to give anything away. The person entered in a hurry.

"Hey, mom, can I have friends over?" the young boy from her memories, Will, came into the kitchen. Julie sensed four more people outside the door in wait. She almost smiled to herself.

"That's fine, honey, but..." Joyce's words came out and the front door instantly cracked open again, the hiding children coming into full-view. "What did I tell you about asking *before* you have everyone bike over here?"

"I know, I know...it's just...Nancy's in Mike's basement being annoying and Dustin's mom doesn't have enough room for us and Lucas'...-"

Joyce interrupted her son. "That's fine. Oh! Will, meet Ms. Preston, she's new to the neighborhood."

"Hi," Will said in a soft, shy voice.

"Hi, Ms. Preston," another boy came forward. "I'm Dustin," he took her hand and kissed the back of it. Unsuspecting, Julie was worried about the memories that she'd get, but all she got from him was something about a game.

"Dustin, stop freaking her out!" another boy shouted and they started pushing each other down the hallway to Will's bedroom.

Julie was humored and took another sip of her wine. A feeling overcame her suddenly and she almost choked as she glanced up at the next child who was retreating to Will's bedroom. A young girl, the same one from Jim's memory. Shy eyes glanced away as Julie stared curiously at her.

"Jane, it's so nice to see you, honey," Joyce's voice startled the girl. She paused and smiled at them softly before going back to the room with the boys. "They're obsessed with this board game of theirs," Joyce laughed. "They play it so much you'd think they'd get tired of it."

"So many kids in the house, you must never be bored."

Joyce nodded but shrugged. "I work a lot actually..." she sighed. "Being a single parent of two is difficult, but Jonathan helps me out so much." Joyce poured another glass of wine. "Speaking of work, are you looking for a job?" Julie nodded. "I know this coffee shop is hiring. It's right next to Melvald's, where I work."

Working at a coffee joint again didn't sound super enjoyable, but whatever brought the money in until she could find something better, she'd take.

"I'll go apply in the morning. Joyce, I appreciate all your help."

"Your life is so interesting to me. I mean, from what you said you moved all this way without anyone or much of anything," she sighed. "I just...I can't imagine. I've been so rooted in this place, especially after marriage, kids, and divorce. You're young still. Why here, of all places?"

Julie shrugged, sighed, concocted a lie. "My aunt passed away recently and after the death of my parents, family's kinda been estranged for me. I guess I just needed a fresh start. Besides, Hawkins just...pulled me in. I feel some kind of connection to it, I guess."

"It has nothing to do with Hopper, does it?" Joyce gave her a look.

Julie felt her cheeks redden. "No! No..." she came up with a quick fib. "My grandfather met his wife here when he was traveling, actually. They fell in love, he'd travel just to come see her. They eventually got married, moved away, and had children. They'd talk about how this was the place that started it all. I guess I just had to see what the hype was about." She paused to take a breath after the lie. "Maybe I'm just a hopeless romantic."

Joyce looked love-struck. "That's such a beautiful story! But I have to say, not much of anything goes on here..." though her words seemed honest, her voice and eyes gave her away.

Yeah...*nothing* happens here. Sure, Julie thought. Even if that was true, *here* sure beat the Hellhole she was in before. She figured she'd take her chances.

5. Repose

Joyce had given Julie the keys and some boxes of kitchen stuff. The next morning Julie contacted Joyce's cousin, Linda, about rent. For once, it was wonderful being busy. She'd checked out of the motel, moved her few boxes and suitcases into the new house, and took some time to pick up a few decorative pieces. She'd always imagined what her home would be like when she was on her own again. Those nights at the facility were typically spent daydreaming. She couldn't wait for this new start.

After a little shopping, Julie went to the coffee shop Joyce suggested. Meeting with the manager, she asked for a job. It didn't take much convincing, she was surprised, and she was on the schedule within a half hour of meeting the woman.

"I'll see ya on Saturday then! God, we needed the help," the manager, Cindy, sighed while passing over a free coffee.

"It's perfect timing," she agreed.

"I can't believe you came *here* of all places," the owner chuckled. "Honestly, Julie, you should'a gone to a big city."

Julie smiled sweetly, ignoring her comment. "Nothing interesting happens here, huh?"

"Eh, not really. Though, are you single? We have a barista, Adam, who is just..." Cindy sighed. "I'm married or I'd chase him, I swear."

"I just got the job and you're already trying to hook me up?" Julie couldn't help but laugh at the situation. It felt like she was meeting with an old friend. She remembered that some people you just vibe with. It'd been a while since she'd felt this.

"You're young, new here...I'm just looking out for ya!"

"Always appreciated," Julie shook her head. She felt awkward, part of her wanting to leave but another part of her not knowing where to go exactly. "I'll see you Saturday."

She finished her coffee and left the shop, making her way over to Melvald's to tell Joyce the good news. In front of the store Julie noted the chief's cruiser and her shoulders tensed a little. Entering the building the bell sounded and she felt awkward for interrupting the conversation Joyce and Jim were in.

"Julie!" Joyce exclaimed, smile on her face. "How'd it go?"

Jim's eyes were on her and she could feel the confusion coming off of him in waves.

"I got the job so," she smiled. "I just wanted to come over and thank you for the recommendation."

Joyce gave her a sweet look. "Oh, sweetie, no problem! I'm glad to help get you started here. I was just telling Jim that you're renting Linda's house."

Jim nodded stiffly. "Welcome to Hawkins."

"Once I get settled, I'd love to have you guys over for dinner. You've both done so much for me and I can't express how much I appreciate it." Her eyes trailed over Jim's reaction to this. She felt warm speaking such things to them, but she felt like she needed to say it.

Joyce glanced at Jim and then back. "You mean a meal I don't have to cook? Count me in."

Julie smiled. "Well, you know where to find me. I'll leave you guys to it."

She turned on her heels and left quickly, feeling the tension between the two of them. She didn't know for sure what she was feeling and a part of her wanted to dig, but she let it be.

"Hey, Julie!" Jim called as she opened her car door. He took long strides toward her, looking calm and collected. "I uh...you..." he huffed for a second. "I know you have questions for me and...I guess I just wanna..."

"Jim," Julie interrupted him. "In time, I get it. Don't worry."

Jim's head was spinning thinking about everything. When he picked Jane up last night Joyce mentioned that Julie was there and he realized that Jane might have spoken with her. Yet when Jim pressed Joyce for information she didn't have much to give. Apparently Julie hadn't spoken much to her, hadn't made a skin contact, hadn't tried getting in her head. He called it progress, considered it promising. Maybe she *was* trustworthy. It wasn't his plan to be this guarded with her, but he felt like it was necessary.

She got in her car, started it, rolled down the window. He bent down, leaned closer.

"I'm not blowin' ya off," he assured her. She sensed that he was telling the truth and, to be honest, she just wanted to avoid him at all cost at the moment.

"Liar," she accused in a teasing tone. "If you wanted me to know, I'd know."

Jim looked slightly offended, slightly humored. "Keep that attitude and you'll never know."

She shifted into gear. "I'm only sticking around because I want to help, Jim, you can convince yourself otherwise as much as you want." And then she offered, "I got used to waiting at the facility. Trust me, I can wait for you to share your secrets."

That sentence alone left a hollow feeling in Jim's chest and he stepped back, lighting a cigarette and watching her go.

...

Food stocked in the house, some pictures hung on the wall, Julie felt content going to work on Saturday wearing jeans and a black t-shirt. She tied the smock around her waist and greeted the guests that walked in.

Some of the items on the menu had different names than the ones at the café in her hometown, but the job was straightforward. She was grateful for her previous experience making this an easier transition. Her boss still had her look through recipe books to study which was

nice when the 'rush' wasn't active. She'd been studying and wiping up for a few hours when her boss came in mid-shift.

"I'll just take a coffee, some caramel, and two sugars please," came a soft, sweet voice.

The young woman before her was maybe a high school student – dainty, pretty – but when she handed over the cash and their fingers met briefly Julie got a good look into her memories: a young redhead disappearing from a pool, hunting down a monster in a house that looked all too similar to Joyce's.

"Here's your change," she forced her mouth to work, forced her way out of the memories.

"Keep the change," the young woman voiced, her eyes narrowing after a second as Julie went to go mix together her coffee. "You're not from around here, are you?" she asked. "I've never seen you before."

"I just moved in actually," Julie said, mixing the caramel in. "It's weird being the newbie."

"I can't imagine," the girl said. "I'm Nancy."

"It's nice to meet you, Nancy." She handed over the coffee.

She couldn't shake all the connections she was making with the memories of the people in this town.

Shortly after Nancy sat down, Julie could sense her fear. A quick glance up convinced her that her feelings were right. Nancy sat staring out of the café's side window, mouth a hard line, pulse quickening.

"Are you okay?" she knew she shouldn't have vocalized the sensation, but she couldn't help it.

Nancy hesitated, glancing away. "Y-yeah..."

Julie didn't believe her but she went back to cleaning up.

"Hey," Linda came over, "have you taken your break yet?" Julie shook

her head. "Go on."

It was a nice day outside, really. The breeze was a little chilly but the sun was glorious. Julie grabbed a mug of coffee and sat out front on the bench. Any opportunity she had to be outside in the elements she appreciated, even if the breeze was blowing her sweater open and she felt the cool air on the tops of her feet from her high heels.

Jim's cruiser was parked over in front of Melvald's again and Julie couldn't help but have that feeling once more – like something was going on between the two of them, though it was none of her business.

She sipped her coffee, closing her eyes as the breeze blew. The bell rang beside her, alerting her of movement from the shop. Nancy left in a hurry. In the parking lot a young man stood smoking a cigarette while leaned against his Camaro. Julie watched him as he watched Nancy. The minute he started toward her, Julie put down her half-empty coffee mug.

"Hey, Nance. Nice to see ya," the boy called.

"Billy, leave me alone."

He put out his cigarette on the pavement. "You seen Steve lately?"

"I said 'leave me alone,' Billy."

Julie was standing now, making her way toward the scene as this Billy dude tried to put his hands on Nancy.

"Nancy, hey," she called. "I think you left a book in the shop." She didn't take her eyes off of this Billy guy who was clearly giving her a once-over. "Come back inside for a minute." Nancy took no time allowing Julie to swoop in and hide her under her wing – she jogged back over to the coffee shop and stood in the doorway. Billy approached, eyes narrowed, lips pursed, checking out her chest in that tight black t-shirt. "You getting some coffee or?" Julie asked him, ignoring the annoyance she was feeling toward him from Nancy. "Because if not you really shouldn't be parked there – it's for customers only."

Billy appeared humored as he got uncomfortably close. Julie didn't back down, knowing that that was what he wanted.

"Yeah?" he smirked. "Well aren't you just a spitfire." Julie said nothing. He smiled and it was distractingly beautiful. "Ma'am, I apologize for the inconvenience. I'm not really in the *mood* for coffee at the moment. You work here?"

"Yes, I do."

He looked her up and down once more. "Then I'll have to take a raincheck. I'd love to know if what you're selling is any good." His words dripped innuendo but Julie gave no reaction but a fake smile before he turned away and got in the car. The engine roared.

Squealing wheels were heard as Julie turned back to see Nancy, but Jim was on his way toward them.

"Few days in town and you're already picking fights with the local cretin, huh?" Jim shook his head. "I advise being cautious around that one."

Julie just smirked at him. "I can handle myself, Jim."

"That's what they all say."

"Are you coming over for dinner or what?" she crossed her arms and Jim couldn't help but glance at her breasts.

"Tonight?"

"Yes."

Jim exhaled a puff of smoke, bringing his cigarette back up to his lips to inhale once more. Give him time to think. "Depends. What're you making?"

"Depends. What do you want?"

Shit, she was fiery today. Raising a brow at her, he smirked. "Something with red sauce."

"Hm...stuffed shells and garlic bread?" her hands shifted to her hips. Those heels didn't make her much closer to his height, which he found funny. "Joyce told me to let you pick so here we are."

Oh. Joyce was coming too.

"Well, I picked. Let's see if you can produce, Mississippi." Hop was egging her on purposefully, enjoying the way she looked at him when she was flustered.

"I get off at 5 so after that works?"

Hopper nodded, "Be there around 6."

"Alright, see you then."

He watched her walk away then stomped out the cigarette, smirking to himself.

...

It wasn't that Hopper really thought this through. Sometimes he just got lucky. Sometimes he forgot that he had someone else at home relying on him, but Jane was extremely independent so half the time he wasn't even needed. Thankfully for him, tonight Jane was staying with the Wheeler's.

"I'll be there to pick you up later tonight, okay?" Hopper said over the phone.

"Will you be by yourself?" Jane asked innocently over the phone, knowing that he sometimes fell asleep on the couch and picked her up from their little *game night* too late.

"No. I...uh...I'm having dinner."

"Dinner?"

"Yes, dinner."

"By yourself?"

Another sigh. "No, kid, with a friend."

"9:00?"

"Yep, I'll be there by nine."

They hung up and Hopper pulled out another cigarette, reading over some paperwork. His mind drifted to the questions he knew Jane would have for him once she found out about Julie. And it was only a matter of time. For fuck's sake she'd already gotten that Wheeler kid away from the punk, Billy. Kids talk, especially about new people and especially in a small town.

She'd have to meet Eleven sooner or later.

...

He should have brought something, that was his first thought upon pulling in the driveway of Julie's place. Joyce was already there and he was sure she brought a bottle of wine or something. In all honesty, she was lucky he showed. It'd been a long day and he was tired.

Rapping his knuckles against the front door, he was surprised when she opened so quickly.

"Hey, I'm glad you made it!" Julie ushered him in, wine glass in hand.
"You want something to drink?"

"Please," he groaned.

"Hey, Hop!" Joyce greeted with a small wave. "Long day?"

He slid into a chair at the dining room table, eyeing around the room at the few decorations she'd already put. "God, yeah."

"Beer or whiskey?" Julie called from the kitchen.

"Whiskey will do."

Julie was absolutely glowing when she came back in the room. He wondered if she was just this happy to be in this small town or if it was something else entirely.

"Julie, this place looks amazing. I'm glad you found something," Joyce smiled at her.

"It was all because of you guys. So thank you."

The timer beeped in the other room and Julie quickly went to go grab the food out of the oven. Joyce followed behind her and helped pull out plates and silverware for them.

"So, how are you liking the new house?"

Julie scooped the stuffed shells and placed them on the plates, dripping more sauce on them, then placing garlic bread on the plates as well.

"I really like it. I've always thought about having a place of my own," she almost gave away more information about herself but stopped. "I guess it just gets lonely when I'm not at work."

"That's why you're so thrilled to have us here," Joyce grabbed a plate while Julie grabbed both hers and Jim's.

"Guilty. Not to mention I owed you guys." When they came back to the dining room, Jim was up wandering around her living room, taking a look at a few of the things she'd had around the house. He found his way back to the table when the food was served.

...

"Hop, haven't you had enough!?" Joyce laughed, three glasses of wine deep.

Julie served him another plate, grateful for their company still. Jim was on his third helping, fourth piece of garlic bread, third glass of whiskey. Not that Julie was counting.

"Let him eat, Joyce," Julie laughed.

"Didn't think it'd be this good," Hopper chided.

Julie glared across the table. "You're an ass."

All three of them laughed together.

"Ugh! I gotta get goin', Julie. Will has a project he's working on tonight for school and he's leaving the Wheeler's early." Joyce stood from the table, taking her dishes into the kitchen and placing them in the sink. "Thank you for everything."

Julie walked her to the door as Jim finished eating. She half expected Jim to walk her out, but she still couldn't read the two of them exactly.

"Take care. Thanks for coming by."

"You cook like that all the time, I'll be sure to be back."

Julie blushed at this, watching her walk to her car. She closed the door then turned back to Jim who was leaned back in his seat, looking tired.

"You haven't told her about you yet, have you?" Jim eyed her as she sat back down with him. Julie slowly poured another glass of wine. She shook her head. "Do you plan to?"

Did she? Eventually, maybe. Or...not. She didn't know.

"I just met her, Jim. I don't want her to think I'm a freak." She swirled her wine then took a sip.

"Trust me, I don't think she will..."

Julie sighed, shaking her head. "I'll get there."

Hopper glanced at his watch. "Well, Jules, color me impressed." He took a sip of his drink. "Pretty good eats."

She smirked at him. "Appreciated, Chief."

The moment felt incredibly domestic to Julie. She hadn't been alone with anyone but Joyce in the house before. Being three glasses of wine in, she couldn't help but think of the last time they were in a house alone together. She blushed at the thought. Surely Jim hadn't had any intention of her moving into the same town.

"I wasn't shitting you earlier, kid," Jim's voice was serious, all joking aside. She was reminded of their earlier conversation outside of the coffee shop. "As you said: I'll get there."

"Patience it is then, Jim."

When she got up to do dishes, he followed her into the kitchen, leaned against the stove.

"So how weird is it having a place of your own?"

Julie pondered this as she did the dishes and then answered, "Pretty weird. I always thought about it you know? I've had apartments before everything that happened, but it's been so long since I've been able to do what I want and...I don't even know what that is. I just remember dreaming of what I'd do when I got out of that facility."

"And what's that?"

"This...kinda...I guess. Back to normal living. But I think..." she sighed, looking at him and then away again. "I think I just assumed I'd have my parents."

Hopper felt instantly sad for her. Julie had no one.

"What do you mean, Hawkins isn't everything you imagined?" he was trying to use humor to cheer up the mood.

"Oh! That reminds me, I lied to Joyce about why I stayed. I couldn't tell her."

Hopper laughed. "And? What'd you say?"

"Some awful story about my grandpa meeting my grandma here or some shit. Something super romantic. I just froze, didn't want to tell her about my past."

"Yeah? Why did she think you stayed?"

Julie froze again. "You, actually."

"Me?"

She nodded, drying her hands off after finishing the last of the dishes.

"Joyce was digging, wanted to see how we knew each other. I think she was just curious."

"And you told her...?" he wanted to see what she'd said – if she'd mentioned anything about their more physical experiences together all those months ago.

There were times Hopper reflected on those nights. They had been unexpected, really, but enjoyable. He'd admit it to himself, once he'd seen her back in town he let his mind trail back a bit to play catch up and found himself enjoying those memories.

"-Not about *that*," she was blushing at his thoughts. Fuck, he kept forgetting that she could read them. "It's up to you if you wanna tell her...I mean...I have a lot to share, I guess, and that's probably not first on my list."

"And why not?" he was being playful and it was probably the drinks talking a bit.

Julie's face reddened again. "Jim..." she still didn't know if there was something going on between him and Joyce and she'd be damned if she'd ask or search through his thoughts. A part of her wondered if she just felt comfortable with him because he was familiar, unlike everyone else in this town.

"Oh, I'll be sure to tell all the juicy details down to the last touch," he stepped toward her to put his empty glass in the sink and their hips touched. Just that contact made Julie gasp lightly. "Food was good, Mississippi, but I gotta head out."

"Oh, right, yeah, no problem."

Following, she went to see him out and it felt super awkward because she was in her head about what they'd just discussed, images of those nights flashing in her mind.

"Goodnight, Julie."

"G'night, Jim."

She stood on the porch step and watched him go, already dreading returning to the now empty house.

6. Quandary

Weeks went by without much happening. Julie was getting accustomed to working at the coffee shop, having not been too big of a transition from her last job. It was boring most days and she got pretty accustomed to her customers.

Nancy Wheeler was a regular – kind of. Julie noticed that she would come in brooding and leave in a calmer mind frame. She'd brought in Joyce's son Jonathan a few times which always made Julie hesitate. Jonathan was a nice kid but the memories he had, the things he'd think of during the day were so loud and hard for Julie to tune out even from across the room. She'd often take her break after a while if he were there, it made it easier to cope with.

Joyce came in sometimes when she knew the two of them were going to be there. She told the kids that it was because of the coffee, but later had admitted to Julie that she wanted to keep an eye on them. 'They always find their ways into some kinda trouble,' she'd said.

Trouble it was. Billy had been back a few times when Nancy was there, almost like he was trailing her. She'd heard her mention to Jonathan that Billy was after someone named Steve. He still made her uncomfortable, even if he wasn't planning anything.

A few regulars were your typical expectation from a small-town. Some were always on the run, grabbing a coffee to go and then taking off again without a conversation. Then there were others who were slow-going, calming, and always asked questions Julie wasn't ready to respond to. She found herself fibbing about some aspects of her life if they asked, concocting some lie that she knew she'd never be able to keep up with.

And then there was Jim. He started coming a few Mondays, but would periodically stop for a brew. More often than not he'd get called off somewhere or say he was headed out. She wondered if he were fibbing half the time too. There were times she'd glance out the window and watch him walk to Melvad's instead of his truck.

Yet there were times he'd take a seat, run his hand down his facial

hair, and sip his coffee while Julie cleaned up or served the next customer. He'd always find a way to slip in a conversation, though they were never long, and she always found him looking at her out of the corner of his eye. She felt like he was inspecting her, trying to figure her out.

Hopper found himself exhausted one morning. It'd been a long night. He'd sort of mentioned to Jane about Julie, said that there was someone else that was like her. It started a slew of questions that he wasn't ready to answer and he realized he wasn't ready for them to meet. It had been way too soon for him to say anything.

Once again, Jim lay awake at night concocting all of these possibilities in his head. Maybe Julie was sent by Brenner – some type of manipulation – befriending him, getting close to Jane so she can take her back to Brenner.

It sounded ridiculous, he knew, but he couldn't shake these kinds of thoughts. His mind wouldn't let up, drifting into different possibilities all night. Yet underneath it all he had a feeling in the pit of his stomach that he knew these weren't the truth. Eventually he tired and drifted off to sleep but the dreams this rest gave him woke him right up once again. It went on like that for hours.

Jane was still angry when she woke up, he could feel the tension in the cabin. He'd refused to answer some questions, admitted that he didn't know the answers to others, and denied her meeting Julie.

"She was at Will's," Jane announced over breakfast. Hop stilled.
"Weeks ago."

"Yeah."

"I want to meet her."

"Soon, kid. Okay?"

It felt like a repeat of a year ago when he denied her from seeing Mike, when she'd thrown a royal temper tantrum and used her powers on the furniture in the house. This time, though, she hadn't done all that. Instead she just stormed to her room and locked herself

in.

"Jim? Jim..." Julie's voice brought him back to the moment and not the memory from that morning. "Do you want more coffee?" she raised the pot beside him.

"Yeah, thanks,"

Julie eyed him. "You're distracted today."

"Yeah..." he thought about telling her. Glancing over his shoulder he noted no one in the shop at the moment. "Jane's...uh...kinda pissed at me."

Julie stilled. This was the first time he'd talked about her in weeks and he never gave her any personal moments from his home.

"Oh?" was all she said.

Hopper swallowed hard. "She wants to meet you and she's mad that I've hidden you from her this long."

Julie tried to calm her rapid heartbeat, wanting to take it gently so he didn't drop the subject. She brought the coffeepot back behind the counter, wiped things up, didn't make eye contact.

"You have your reasons I'm sure. She probably just doesn't want to hear them."

Hopper grew silent then, focusing on his coffee mug. "Yeah. Reasons..." he grunted.

He was questioning these reasons and it pissed him off that he couldn't figure out what was the right thing to do. He'd pussyfooted around mentioning it to Joyce – she'd know what to do – but that meant that he'd have to out Julie as one of Brenner's fucked up experiments.

Julie narrowed her eyes at that. "What?"

Eyes quickly darted her way when she raised her voice. "Uhhhh..."

Julie could feel her anger rising. She rounded the counter, unable to reign her annoyance back in. This had been going on far too long. She'd been waiting patiently for him to come around, let his little secret out. Jane went to school, for God's sake – right? All Julie had to do was hang around Joyce's house and soon enough Jane would be there.

"Is this still about you not trusting me, Jim?" she came toward his table, could read that his answer was 'yes'. "What else do I have to fucking do to prove it to you that I'm not the enemy here?"

Hopper sat silent, irritated by her outburst but mostly amused. He was starting to trust her if he were honest – he was just getting in his own way.

"How'd you get out this last time?" Hopper spoke it in a slow, gruff voice, never losing her gaze.

Julie's face reddened as the embarrassment crept up her spine. She wasn't prepared to tell him that story, not entirely. Hop watched her, bringing his coffee mug to his lips. She wasn't going to tell him and he knew that.

"Jim..." she felt deflated.

He shrugged, standing at full height which made Julie feel even smaller. One slow movement he removed his wallet and grabbed a few bucks. Two fingers held the bills and he stepped forward to slide the tip into her work apron.

Julie felt him close off once again as he shifted the wallet back in his pocket, removed a cigarette from the pack, slipped it between his lips. He took a few steps toward the door and it felt like each footfall made Julie tenser.

"Jim," Julie called out. He stopped, barely turned his gaze to his left. "I, uh...I tricked him. Got him alone and knocked him out." Jim stayed silent she realized and she felt like her utterance wasn't enough for him, but she couldn't disclose everything yet. "We were outside and I just took off on foot." Still silence. "I'll tell you more, I promise. Just...not yet."

Hop processed this, surprised she even admitted anything. He found himself saying, "As I said, Jules, I have my reasons," even though he didn't believe it in full.

He left.

Julie sighed loudly, staring up at the ceiling for a moment before forcing herself to go back to work.

...

The bell rang about a half hour before her shift ended and if this wasn't a bad day she didn't know what was. The situation with Jim just completely threw her off. She wanted to be understanding, she really did, but it was so damn hard. It wasn't that she was trying to start shit with him that morning, but she just couldn't help the frustration that came about with him not trusting her. Couldn't he feel that she wanted to keep Jane safe?

When she glanced over at the patrons she was surprised to see a group of kids.

"Do you have a bike rack?" one of them asked.

"No," she was still processing the fact that kids were coming in. "You can just leave it by the coat rack over there, actually, so they don't get stolen. Don't worry about it."

"Thank you," a few of them chimed in and Julie realized who they were.

"Wait, you guys are friends with Joyce's son, uh..." she hummed, trying to remember his name. And then a few of the friends parted in the doorway and the boy met eyes with her. Her grip tightened on the counter in front of her, a flash of his memories invading her senses. "Will," she recalled.

"Right. Hey, Ms. Preston. How are you?" the one with the curly hair came forward.

It took Julie a second to build that wall up, block out those memories of a monster inside of him, keep her cool in front of all of these kids.

"I'm doing alright. Remind me of your names again?" she asked in hopes to get her mind focused on something else. They went around the room and Julie noticed that Jane wasn't with them this time around. Curious. "I don't peg you as coffee drinkers, so what'll it be?"

"Well, uh..." Lucas stepped forward. "Cappuccino?"

Julie nodded, smiling. "Can do."

She made four of them and watched them settle in at a booth. They were whispering and glancing toward her then awkwardly smiling when she caught their glances.

Hadn't Jim said he'd told Jane about her?

As she approached the table with the drinks she overheard a whisper of, "Jane said it's her" and "how will we know?"

So they were here to snoop on her? Interesting.

"Here you guys are," she placed a drink before each of them. "It's on the house."

"Whoa, thank you ma'am!" Will exclaimed which made Julie wave him off with a smile.

Back behind the counter and cleaning up she overheard a few more comments of, "she doesn't look...weird...yanno? Like El did." Another piped in with, "I wonder what her powers are then."

"Ms. Preston?" Dustin called to her. "When did you move in?"

"Almost two months ago now."

Dustin nodded, eyes squinty as he seemed to consider this. "And where did you move from?"

"Mississippi."

He was playing detective and it made Julie laugh at their antics. In all honesty she got a more open vibe from them and she wondered how much easier it would be to talk about her powers with them

than anyone else. Maybe meeting Jane wouldn't be as intimidating as she'd expected.

He couldn't think of any other questions she could tell so he went back to talking to his group. What did she appear like to them, she wondered. Did they see her as a freak or an interesting new addition to the town?

As much as her mood was sour most of the day, she was glad she got to end it on a better note.

The boys stayed until close and she let them chatter with her and each other as she closed up.

"Yeah, well my parents say I'm making my house a mess and no one's gonna want to spend time there pretty soon," Dustin laughed at the conversation he and the boys were having. "Where is your place, Ms. Preston?" he asked as she was locking the door.

"A little blue house on Habershan."

"I know where that is! Cool!"

"Well, be careful on your way home, guys," Julie said as she made her way to her car.

"Will do, Ms. Preston," Mike called back to her.

As Julie drove, she realized that if the boys were snooping on her it could only mean one thing: Jane would be seeking her out too. It was only a matter of time.

7. Stupor

Hop entered the bar with a sigh, knowing full-well how he expected tonight to go. Gwen would probably be here and he'd play that game again where he pretended he didn't see her, wasn't interested. And then he'd get three beers deep and maybe consider sending her a glance across the bar and she'd strut her way over to him and lean down just enough for him to see her cleavage peeking out from underneath the cut of her dress.

It wasn't his favorite thing, but it held him long enough until the lonely left.

With Jane at a slumber party he figured he had time to do something for himself for once.

And then he met eyes with Julie nursing a mixed drink and looking completely downtrodden. And the night took a turn.

"Hey, Jules," he slid on the barstool beside her. She seemed startled at his presence at first which surprised him, given her abilities. Were things different when she was drinking?

"Hey, Jim," she put on a fake smile but he saw right through it. Was she still pissed about their last conversation a few days ago at the coffee shop? He sighed at the thought.

Tapping his fingers on the bar to get the barkeep's attention, he nodded toward the man who brought him his usual. He'd almost asked Julie if the two empty drinks beside her were hers but judging by the glassy expression he figured he knew that answer.

"You...uh...you alright?" Jim ran a hand down his beard as his drink came. He took a gulp of the Old Fashioned, waiting out her reply.

Julie debated unloading on him, letting him crack down the walls she'd started building up since her last escape from the facility. It might be helpful, she mused to herself, to let someone in. Maye it would help him to trust her so she could meet Jane after all this time in this crummy town...Yet she was so used to being in her head with

her thoughts, learning poor coping skills when she was imprisoned in that room all those months. The little she did speak at the time was all bullshit, to Brenner, lies or half-truths just to get him to trust her enough to start letting her outside. Where could she begin to tell Jim or anyone these things? He still didn't trust her enough to meet Eleven. And if she let her biggest secret out? She couldn't even imagine the extent of that reaction.

Instead, she raised her glass, clinked it against his. "Let's drink."

Hopper didn't know how to take that. In his experience with women, the long pause typically meant something. He'd half expected her to word vomit at that moment, let him in. There were so many questions surrounding her and as a cop it pissed him off that she was so closed off sometimes.

Back when they'd first met she was hostile at first too, guarded, until she got to drinking or they were staring down the face of another danger and she let him in on her history – shined a light in the dark corners that he was curious about. He wondered if it would be similar now. What were those last months like in the facility? Did she know how badly it killed him to find out that she was here – right under his nose – all those months? Did he want her to know?

So he clinked his glass against hers and downed his drink quickly. Well, at least the company wasn't bad.

She ordered shots and holy shit did that girl know how to throw them back. Hop was impressed, really. He was never one to turn down alcohol.

Nursing her second drink since he showed up, Julie finally turned to him to see him counting the glasses around her. Working on her fourth of what looked like a mojito, two shots downed...

"Counting up, Jim?" she placed her elbow on the bar, rest her head on her closed fist, and looked at him. Jim opened his mouth to respond when she said, "catch up, Hop."

She never called him that, he came to realize, and it sounded foreign from her lips.

"Tell me," he started to say before drinking another gulp of his Old Fashioned. "are we celebrating or trying to forget?"

She pondered this a moment, scrunching up her nose before saying, "both."

Julie was jealous of Jim's tolerance. He must be practiced, she imagined. Not to mention his height and weight. She never did stuff like this, though she loved the mojitos and never figured out how to make them just right. She figured she should stop while she was right on the edge of drunk.

"Anything exciting happen today?" she asked before she realized.

Jim pursed his lips, almost smiling before shaking his head then glancing at her. "No," he chuckled. "You picked a pretty boring place to live, kid. Before, well, everything happened...this place was kinda dull." He took another sip. "People in this town don't have too much going on."

"People suck," she said before realizing that thought slipped from her mouth.

Jim watched her reaction; eyes scrunched closed, lips pursed. She opened one eye and then the other to look at him.

"Drunk thoughts there, huh Mississippi?" his tone was light and humored but he instantly felt like an asshole as he watched her expression change from humor to something hollow. So there it was, the reason she was drinking tonight: *home*.

She took another sip of her drink, body turning to face the bar again, away from him. He felt like she physically shut him out again. Great.

Glancing over his shoulder, he made eye contact with Gwen. Her blonde hair dusted over her exposed shoulder in that dress and she made her way to the bar. Jim turned away, glancing at Julie, then back at the bar top. He felt heat beside him in a moment and knew Gwen was there.

"I'll take another Long Island," she told the bartender. Jim didn't look up at her. "Oh! Hopper. Fancy seeing you here," her hand was on his

bicep and he honestly just wanted her to go away. "You alone again tonight?"

The lilt to her voice would have made him crave the attention any other night. But tonight he was invading Julie's space and he felt like scum from bringing up her hometown, probably looked even lower with a blonde woman hanging on his arm now.

"Nah, I'm with a friend."

Julie was surprised by this and maybe it was the alcohol but him calling her a friend made her feel choked up. She'd lost all her friends, lost contact after the facility, distanced herself from everyone when she came home. Jim calling her Mississippi brought it all back in waves, all of the feelings and thoughts she was trying to swallow down with alcohol tonight.

She meant to look up at the woman, smile kindly at meeting her, but her eyes were brimming with tears and she felt like a fucking fool getting so emotional over him calling her his friend. She tried to pass it off as just the alcohol but she knew better. She'd needed this. They were friends.

The woman must have wandered off because Jim was looking at her again, trying to read her, she was sure. She tried to use her ability to read his thoughts but alcohol always numbed her senses.

Suddenly overwhelmed with conflicting emotions, she asked him. "What are you thinking right now?"

Jim finished another drink. "You tell me." He liked this game sometimes, liked to see what she could do when he was prepared to focus on one thing. He hated it when she could just weasel herself into his brain without him prepared. What had she learned from those moments if he wasn't on guard in front of her?

"I can't," she sighed, finally looking up at him from under her lashes. The vulnerable look she had almost knocked Hopper off his barstool.

So he'd been right earlier based on her reaction. "You can't?"

She looked frustrated suddenly, laughed without humor, shook her

head. "Funny how I hate the fucking power but the moment it's foggy I can't rely on it and I want to."

"What do you want to know?" he asked tentatively.

She paused, glanced at the empty glasses. "What you think of me."

Julie said it so quietly he almost thought he'd imagined her words. What did he think of her? God, he didn't want to say the wrong thing and fuck this up. These vulnerable moments with her were few and far between from what he remembered. She was always so guarded, so fiery. Clearly she was feeling her drinks or she wouldn't have asked that question. Glancing at his empty wrist where Sara's hair tie used to be, he found his answer.

"I think you have baggage like the rest of us."

That response overwhelmed her. Julie felt the world shift beneath her, felt like those walls were caving in on her.

She ordered another drink.

Hopper didn't know if that reaction was a good thing or not and he spent the next five minutes in silence, running it over in his head.

He felt pressure on his shoulder which brought him out of his thoughts. Julie was getting down from the barstool, hand on his shoulder to steady herself as her feet met the ground. She was so short and it was kinda humorous watching her slide out of the seat.

She made her way to the bathroom with calculated steps that Hopper recognized quickly. Julie was pretty drunk.

Jim motioned to the bartender, closing his tab and paying for Julie's drinks too. He'd been right about the number of drinks she had. For someone of her body weight, he was surprised she held her own as long as she did.

"Don't tell me you paid my tab too, Chief," came her voice beside him. Her cheeks were heated but otherwise she looked fine. "No more favors." She narrowed her eyes at him.

"I never promised that," he chuckled. "C'mon, let's go."

Julie's chest felt hollow at the thought of going back to that empty house again. She was still getting used to it. She was torn once again: happy to have a place of her own now, but lonely in a way that she hadn't felt in the facility. Back with Brenner she had a mission, didn't have time to focus on the sadness and the ache of the empty room. Now, she just had work.

Jim was leading her out the door, hand on her lower back and she appreciated the closeness for once, leaned into it. Hopper felt it, felt her arm wrap around his middle as they walked to his Blazer, felt her lean her head against his side as they continued on.

"I can't drive, Jim," she hummed, hiding her face in his shirt with a slight giggle.

"Oh, I know," he easily stepped into this caretaker role. The bartender had given him a look on the way out that was annoying to him. What with his past, he was sure the barkeep had him pegged as some scumbag who fed Julie drinks to get her to sleep with him. Maybe he should care more about his appearance around town, but he didn't.

"I don't wanna go back there," she leaned against his Blazer, crossed her arms.

"Where?"

"That house," she said it like a curse word.

"Your house?" Jim questioned to which she shrugged it off, rolling her eyes. Jim sighed. "Why's that?"

Julie reached out for his thick wrist, tried pulling him toward her which just resulted in her stepping closer to him instead.

"It's lonely," she whispered, pressing her head to his chest. Hopper tensed, feeling her hands slip from his wrist to his middle, tracing her fingers up his chest to his biceps. Being touched like that threw him off for a minute and he forgot what his endgame was here.

Lonely. He got that one.

"Let's get you sobered up and then we'll talk about taking you back." He'd almost said *home* but thought better of it.

She jumped into the passenger seat all too eagerly and when they were on their way to the cabin things felt too familiar. He thought back to that time crossing state lines with her, running from the guys they would later find out were part of MKUltra. That felt like a lifetime ago. Before he knew who Brenner was, right after the loss of Sara. Things were *bad* at that point but Julie's situation had managed to distract him temporarily. That is, until she was taken and he was left to pick up the pieces. Those months were dark. Burying himself so deep in sex and booze and pills. He had nothing.

"You're thinkin' some dark thoughts, Chief," Julie hummed beside him, slight smirk on her face.

Jim's mouth fell open as he glanced from the street to her then back. The moonlight made her look even paler and he could see the way her chest rose and fell steadily with every breath in the darkness.

"I thought you said you-

"Alcohol seems to weaken it, especially in a crowded room. Now it's just you and me, Jimmy."

Hopper felt his cheeks redden at the thought. "Did you plan this?"

"What? To get shitfaced in your presence?" she laughed. "No, Jim. Was not my plan."

They got to the cabin and to Julie's irritation Jim helped her out of the Blazer and up the steps.

"You're so damn stubborn," Jim griped as she forced her arm out of his grip.

Julie was aware that he was housing Eleven but she didn't want to make it obvious that she was curious. She was feeling the alcohol still and it was awful how the room was spinning. The cabin seemed homey, lived-in, and it made her ache even more.

"I'm sorry, Jim..." her emotions finally came to her full-force as she

huffed down on the couch, head in her hands. She could feel the tears prickling and it pissed her off. The mix of emotions and the booze really hit her hard all at once and how damn embarrassing was this?

Jim ignored her apology, he hadn't needed it. Stepping toward the fridge he got her a bottle of water. When he came back to sit beside her, she was looking at him, pink cheeks, eyes glassy, tearstains. *Aw fuck* he was uncomfortable with crying women. He handed her the water and she hesitated but took it.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked quietly, not leaning back and getting comfortable yet. She looked at him like a wounded animal. "Figured I'd ask. It's only fair."

She smiled at that but hid it when she slumped her shoulders and shook her head.

A shaky breath left her. "When I started drinking or now?"

"Both," Jim answered instantly and she realized it mirrored the statement she'd made at the bar about celebrating and trying to forget.

She huffed, glaring at him for a second before shoving his shoulder which, again, did nothing to move him. The moment held sadness but he couldn't help but be humored by her antics.

"Earlier..." she exhaled loudly then glanced over at him again. "You're staring."

Jim raised his hands in innocence, leaning back a bit. "I'm *not!*"

Julie shot him another look, pursing her lips before laughing awkwardly. "I can't do this."

"Too late, you already started. Don't be a tease," he meant it as just a comment but soon realized the entendre and his mind went elsewhere. Just in case she was paying attention to his headspace, he tried shifting his thoughts again.

Julie leaned back against the couch. "This is so hard," she was still laughing from the buzz or the tension Hop didn't know.

"Oh, *right*, I don't feel bad at all!" Jim retorted. "You realize that nothing is private for those around you."

Her mouth fell open and Hopper worried he said the wrong thing again.

"Harsh, Jim, real harsh," she still had a smile on her face though. "Okay, fine, I'll go." She was stalling but he could wait all night. "Don't look at me," she groaned.

"Nu-uh. Too bad, I'm looking at you," he bit back.

"Then I'm turning away," she gripped the water bottle tighter and turned her back to him. Jim waited, sighing.

After a few minutes he was amazed at her ability to stall. "If you don't talk I'm taking you back."

She said nothing at first and he started to get up, grab his keys.

"Okay..." she breathed, reaching behind her to pull him back down, hand landing on his hip. When she felt the weight of him back on the couch, she pulled her hands back in her lap. "So...earlier...I was just...stuck in my head, I guess." He gave her a second. "I was thinking about the facility. About Brenner. My home..." her voice broke at this and Hopper had an image in his head of Sara crying, reaching out to him when she scraped her knee. He held back the urge to comfort her. "I was thinking about all the people who've been killed because of this thing. Because of me. Because I escaped."

"Julie..." Jim wanted to stop her there, correct her, interrupt this negative talk.

"I shouldn't have run. I should have torn that place apart from the inside out and never gotten anyone else involved. My sister would still be alive. My parents..." she wiped a hand against her face.

Jesus, what a heavy burden to carry. He couldn't blame her; his head would probably be in the same place if the situation were flipped. Yet she couldn't have handled that all her own. It was too big. Hopper wondered what she'd been thinking when she first came in the cabin, when the tears started.

Julie read this from him, wanting to know his reaction to what she'd said, yet still afraid to turn to see him.

"Jules, I...you can't blame yourself. Believe me that dark thought will get you nowhere."

And he knew, God, he knew. Knew what it felt like to bottle shit up, bury it so deep down so he had a few days of reprieve from that feeling, that guilt. Survivor's guilt. God, he knew it well.

Julie sat quietly, reading him again, sobering up with the more water she drank, yet the room still spun.

"I'm sorry, Jim," she buried her head in her hands. "This is not how I wanted tonight to go. I'm so sorry."

"Just stop, okay? Shit happens. I'm just glad you didn't drive."

"I walked."

"What?"

"I walked to the bar." At this, Jim fumed. The bar was pretty far from her place. What was she thinking? What kind of reckless move was that, given all that had happened to her? Julie was suddenly thinking about her comment about her house and that guilt settled in her chest. "I didn't mean that I don't like my place, by the way." Jim sat silent. "I guess I just didn't expect my life to be like this."

Jim nodded, completely getting that feeling as well. She finally turned back to him and he stilled, feeling vulnerable himself now that she could see his expression.

"Expectations will kill ya."

Julie pulled her legs up onto the couch, rest her head against the back cushion, stared up at Jim. She looked tired; like that emotional outburst was enough to push her into exhaustion.

"Did you have any?"

"Expectations?" he inquired. She nodded sleepily. "Yeah?"

"Hmmm..." she closed her eyes for a second and he flinched, worried she was trying to read him again. "Things never work out like we plan, huh?"

"No."

A few moments of silence and he left to go take a leak. When he came back into the room, Julie was curled up on the couch, breathing even. Snaking the water bottle from her hand, he leaned down to pick her up. He worried that Jane might see her in the morning on the couch if she came home early – God forbid – and ask questions, so he figured letting her take his bed for the night was a good choice.

Careful through the doorway, he set her down in his unmade bed and pulled the covers up over her. She'd probably be uncomfortable sleeping in jeans but he didn't want to risk any injuries to himself; if she woke up in his bed with no pants on he could imagine the fiery woman coming after him with a sharp object.

8. Doldrums

Hopper had taken the couch and he slept like crap that night. He'd gotten up to take some pain meds for his back before it really started hurting. He'd left some Advil on the nightstand for Julie when she woke up, just in case.

Then he started brewing coffee. He felt like drinking the whole pot. Fuck, he needed a better couch...

Julie woke up with a gasp, mind wrapping itself around last night. She thought Jim was going to take her home, but this wasn't her home...

Beside the bed were pills and a water bottle. It was then that she remembered all of the embarrassing things she did the night before. What all had she told Jim? This was his place, she assumed, judging by the fact that this room smelled like him.

God, her head was throbbing. She'd been such an idiot last night. Did she tell him that she wished she didn't live alone? That her new house reminded her of what she never got a chance to have? Family. He didn't need to know that and she hoped to God she hadn't said a damn thing. From what she'd seen of his headspace he had enough on his plate.

She'd slept in her jeans and her legs felt stiff. The light sensitivity was incredible this morning and she buried her face in the covers once more. Maybe she could sneak out of the window, Jim would never know where she went.

Her head still throbbing, she figured she should maybe take those meds beside the bed, though she should eat something...

She must have kicked off her shoes in her sleep she realized as she searched the room for them. When they were found, she left them by the bed and padded barefoot to the doorway of the room. Glancing out, she saw Jim sipping a coffee mug and watching something on TV.

Awkwardly she stepped into view. "Hey."

"Hey."

"So...about last night."

"What about last night?"

She cringed as the volume of his voice this morning. Hangover, she was sure.

"I probably said some things and..."

"Coffee?" Jim offered, standing up and busying himself to make her a mug though she never replied.

Was he trying to change the subject? She followed him into the kitchen, leaning against a cabinet. She figured her headache couldn't get worse so she took a second to breathe and try to read him. Jim was blocking, as usual, but there were little snippets of what she'd said last night – about expectations and people sucking and how she didn't want to go home. Is that why he brought her here?

And then his mind landed on Eleven as soon as the phone rang. She could see her in his mind, could feel the fear bubbling in his stomach like he didn't know what to do.

Quickly he grabbed the phone as if Julie was going to answer it.

"This is Hopper," he answered, handing a steaming mug of coffee to her. "Hey Karen. Yeah. Alright. No, that's fine...I...ok. Thanks." He hung up and Julie realized she was so focused on trying to remember last night that she didn't listen to the other line. "Uh..."

Julie locked eyes with him, mid-sip of her coffee. Her stomach knotted and she felt like she might vomit but she swallowed down the warm liquid.

She wanted to say that she was sorry for taking up his night, wanted to take off. Her eyes wandered to the room beside her and she noticed a white gown under the bed, a similar gown that she wore in the facility. Her chest rose and fell quickly as shaky breaths left her.

She put the coffee mug down, tears forming in her eyes as her mind took her back to those 'experiments' the pills, the 'surgeries', the scars.

Hopper watched in confusion as Julie paled, her eyes fixated on something in Jane's room. Fear bubbled up inside him. Was there something there? A creature? He took two long steps toward her, peering into the room himself. What did she see?

"No..." Julie whispered, backing away, head throbbing.

Once again, it was like she was back there in that moment. She knew she wasn't, could feel the floorboards of Jim's cabin beneath her bare feet, could feel that she was in jeans and not a hospital gown. She turned and could see the bathroom of Jim's cabin. Beginning to walk that way, she paused when images flashed in her mind – Brenner coming up to hold her when she tried to jump off the surgery table, his hands like ice on her heated skin. Stumbling forward, she felt like she was back in that room, watching a monster rip through the walls. With a blink, she was back in Jim's cabin, somehow making it to the sink to splash water on her face and see a frightened Jim in the mirror over her shoulder.

She'd done something similar, splashing water on her face after that pill they had her take, feeling like she was suffocating inside of her own skin. The tears still fell and she was gasping for breath. Jim's hand was on her back but she imagined Brenner hovering over her shoulder and back in that memory she went:

'It'll be okay, little bird. Just let the medicine take effect...' he'd said.

But her mind was spinning and her limbs felt so damn heavy and she was on the verge of collapse. It was in her. Something in that 'medicine' was clawing her alive from the inside out. Cut it out. All she could think was to cut it out.

Jim was horrified. Did she need a doctor? This was not reaction from a hangover. What had she seen? What the Hell was going on with her?

He pressed his hand to hers.

"Breathe," he tried to instruct the gasping woman, fighting off his own memories of Sara. That fear was still there – that absolute terror in his chest when she had hyperventilated in the park that day.

And now Julie about to pass out on his bathroom floor from what, he could only imagine. It looked a lot like what Will got, how Joyce described his weird visions. PTSD?

He grabbed her hands with both of his and suddenly felt it, a similar tickling sensation up his spine like that time he took her back to see the facility – when she thought she saw a ton of cars in the empty lot. She had given him that vision with just a touch. His eyes flashed to a foggy vision of her in a hospital gown, Brenner whispering in her ear.

She'd taken a scalpel from the operating table with such a quick motion Brenner hadn't even had a chance to react. She started pressing it into her stomach, cutting through fabric and just grazing skin above her navel.

"Julie stop!" Brenner instructed, grabbing the scalpel from her quickly.

She shoved him down. Get it out! Her mind was screaming. Without a sharp object, she just shoved her fingers down her throat and puked. The overall awful feeling of vomiting was better than how she felt before. Relief. She felt like she was doing the right thing, like her body wouldn't feel that way again – not for a long while.

Brenner looked shocked and angry when she stood up wiping her mouth.

"Now you know what we have to do. I tried for you, Julie. I truly did." He shook a pill out of a container he kept in his jacket pocket and pressed her to the wall, kissing the top of her head as he clasped his hand around her mouth.

The pill felt awful on her tongue and she screamed against his palm, thrashing against him until other lab coats came to restrain her. She felt like she could pass out and when the pill slipped down her throat she sobbed against Brenner's hand, choking and gasping.

"We can keep doing this so long as you fight us, little bird. I'd like to make this easier on you. Please, let me help you. Do you want that?" he cooed in her ear. Sobbing, she found herself nodding. "Good girl..."

Julie pulled away from the hands that held her, hands she thought were Brenner's but knew were Jim's. Scrambling for the toilet, she felt her stomach lurch. Jim was pulling at her hair in an instant, sitting beside her against the wall.

He stared at her, sweat coating his forehead, heart racing, mouth open. It felt so *real*. He felt like he was in that room with her and Brenner, felt like he'd been drugged, like his limbs were heavy, like there was a weight in his belly.

Hopper remembered all that time ago when he was at Julie's parent's cabin, trying to wake her while she thrashed in the tub and screamed out. He remembered shaking her in that ice cold tub and not knowing what to do, fearing the worst.

"I get these memories sometimes. Dreams, maybe...I don't know. But they feel so real and it's like I'm there again," she'd said when they were on the run from Brenner.

At that time he'd acknowledged his own struggles with his night terrors, sometimes a memory clouding his brain but nothing like that. Nothing like what she'd just experienced. And, damn it, he wondered if it was because of something in Jane's room. Didn't that damn Dr. Owens say something about a trigger?

She reached up to flush the toilet after her stomach stopped convulsing. Jim's hands were still in her hair, holding it back. She glanced at him, covered her mouth. A few strands of hair fell loose from his fingers. She stood up and he let go.

Washing her hands and rinsing her mouth out, she stole glances at Jim who still sat against the wall. He was looking at her through half-lidded eyes, mouth a hard line, just examining her.

She didn't know what to say. She could still feel the weight of that flashback and it had been the most intense one she'd ever had. Was Jim upset with her? He'd had to play damage control for far too long with her and it embarrassed her to no end to be taken care of.

She glanced up to the mirror and noticed the trickle of blood coming from her nose.

And then it hit her. He'd gripped her hand.

"Oh, no..." she turned to him suddenly, eyes wild. "Jim, you..." His eyes scanned her face but he said nothing.

He looked heated, sweat on his forehead, fingers clasping and unclasping. Surely she'd given him that flashback, just like she did with the cars in the parking lot at the facility or when she transferred her memories to him in his office a few weeks back. Serious power made her nose bleed. He didn't need to tell her that he'd seen things. She knew.

Shit.

...

Julie wanted to run, take off, get out but she had no idea where this cabin was and when she walked outside she saw nothing but woods. It reminded her of her last escape but she was too drained from that last memory and so she forced herself to refocus her mind.

Taking a seat on the porch steps, Julie took a few deep breaths, stared at the leaves on the ground, the veins in her hands.

Hopper was inside making toast. He figured she couldn't stomach anything else currently and he honestly didn't want to go *talk* right now. His mind was still reeling from all that. In a matter of a second everything had gone from questioning things in his head to watching Julie have some weird PTSD moment. He'd hung up the phone, worried because Jane would be getting dropped off in a few hours and how was he going to handle that if Julie was still here? Did he want Jane to meet her? Was it a good idea?

Judging by what just happened, Hopper hesitated once again. Maybe they weren't good for each other at the moment. He knew that Jane would be curious, knew that Julie wanted to meet her and protect her but if these flashbacks were going to be a constant thing around her then, well, shit did they have some work to do.

Hopper found himself suddenly angry, mind tracing back to the image in his head. Brenner, shoving some kind of drug down her

throat, hand clasped over her mouth, kissing her forehead like he was doing a kindness for her. He figured it was LSD, judging by what he'd learned before about MKUltra. He could almost picture Jane in a similar situation, Brenner kissing Jane's forehead, cooing sweet lies in her ear, mental manipulation. Her 'Papa' crafting the perfect weapon.

Is that what it was with Julie too? He couldn't imagine. And she never shared.

She'd run outside before he could say anything, not that he knew what to say. She hadn't gone far, just sat on the porch steps, staring out into the woods. He was sure she wanted her space.

Toast ready – a little burnt – he brought it out to her with her coffee.

Once outside Hopper put the plate in her hands, wondering if it would stop them from shaking. He huffed down beside her and they sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Eat," he demanded. He didn't mean to take his anger out on her, didn't mean to snap but he did.

She looked defiant and he saw her usual self start to crack through the shell.

Time. What she needed was time.

He heard her crunching quietly on the toast and he relaxed a bit. At least she was eating.

"Jane is coming back home soon." He spoke the sentence without looking at her. She said nothing and he wondered if he confused her. Should he have called her Eleven? But then he remembered her ability and felt it, she just *knew*. "I'm wondering how you want to handle this."

Was he leaving it in her hands this time? Was he giving her that power to choose? He realized that, yes, he was. After everything he was starting to piece together about her he realized that she didn't have much choice in anything. With Brenner. And the experiments. And losing everything. He had this image in his head of her reaching toward light but coming up short, always coming up short...

"I want to meet her, Jim. I really do." She put the plate down and he glanced at it to make sure she ate everything. She did. "I'm just not sure it's the best idea today."

Jim found himself breathing, relieved. He wasn't ready, not yet. He could tell that she meant no harm but with the image of Brenner hitting like a ton of bricks he was worried. What if she brought them here, what if she brought *someone*...

"Okay," he agreed.

"Soon though," she said it as almost a question and he finally met eyes with her for the first time since the flashback. "Promise me?"

"Yeah," Hopper croaked out. "Promise."

She seemed satisfied with that. "I'm going to say it one last time: I'm sorry about all of this."

Hopper turned his whole body toward her, slightly humored slightly irritated. "And I'm gonna say it one last time: shut the fuck up."

Julie feigned shock, laughing him off after a second.

"I deserved that," it was the first time he saw her smile in a while. He liked it, he realized. And then it was gone just as quickly as it came. "Jim, what all did you see?"

She could just read it from him, he figured – pull her own memories back or was that too painful? Hopper felt like she needed to hear him say it.

"Well," he swallowed hard. "You tried stabbing yourself with a scalpel for starters." He was hoping she would stop him there after learning where he picked up. She didn't say a word. "And then since you threw that '*medicine*' up, Brenner forced it back down." His fists clenched when he spoke that part and he swore he could smell his aftershave. It was weird, almost like after peeking behind the curtain of her memories he almost thought they were his own.

"What did it make you feel?"

"Angry," Jim answered immediately.

Julie looked comforted yet sorrowful. "I mean...did you feel...like, drugged when you saw it?"

"...Yes."

Julie remembered transferring memories to Brenner too, remembered him wanting the good memories, asking for memories of comfort or joy. She remembered his reaction when she sent him something painful – it stuck with him, she could tell. Made him look at her with a little sorrow in his eyes. If it could do that to a monster like him she wondered what it was doing to Jim to be aware of such a painful part of her past.

"If that ever happens again, avoid my hands."

Jim didn't acknowledge that remark and a part of her wondered why.

"Does that happen often?"

"Not...very often. Sometimes," she sighed. "I don't know how to answer that, Jim..."

He nodded slowly as the soft breeze blew. "What triggered it?"

Julie hesitated with the answer. Was this something he'd use as ammunition? A reason for her not to meet Jane?

"Her hospital gown."

And, damn it, didn't Jim tell her to throw that thing out? She hadn't had much from her past and he figured she wanted to keep it because of that, but now he wanted to burn that thing.

Silence followed once again, but the thoughts in his head were racing. Julie let him be, didn't push. Instead she focused on the sunlight flitting between the leaves on the trees, the way the breeze blew her hair. Last night and the events of the morning left her feeling drained. The hangover wasn't even a worry at the moment; she knew she'd have a headache anyway after that memory cutting through her mind like a knife.

"It's nice here," she hummed as the sunlight hit her face. She could stay here. She felt safe here.

"Julie...is this..." Jim sighed, shaking his head, he stopped himself. His eyes begged her to read him at that moment so he didn't have to say it aloud – didn't have to feel like an asshole for saying it.

She listened, touched his arm for a moment. *'Is this going to happen every time you see Jane?'* was the question he was going to ask.

Julie felt the pang of sadness hit her. She'd read many scattered sentences, many woes in his thoughts. She felt guilty; while she'd been sitting there enjoying the weather and the calm, Jim was overwhelmed with thoughts.

"I'm not sure," Julie answered honestly. "Jim, I understand your worry about keeping her safe. I don't know her, but I know some of what she's gone through and..." she breathed. "Jim, just thinking about these things, re-living them at times...it's so much for me; I can't imagine how difficult it is for her." Jim sighed, nodding, resting his head against the porch rail. Julie could tell he was in pain without even reading his thoughts. She wanted to give him space. "I want to be here to help her, but to help you too, Jim. As her guardian...you've got a lot on your shoulders."

Hopper flinched at that, knowing that he'd never told her aloud that he was Jane's guardian. She read it from him and that privacy taken from him felt chilling once again.

"I know this, Jules. I just...can't get outta my own head, yanno?"

She felt like he was baring his soul to her, similar to the way he did at her parent's cabin and that closeness warmed her from within.

"I can't make anything better right now, I'm not sure what's gonna happen but I'll go." At her words, Jim looked over at her languidly. "If it's better if I leave her be, I'll go." Did he want that? Hopper didn't know what he wanted anymore. He wanted to rest, he thought. She got an idea from this. "I...want to do something for you, Jim."

He looked at her lazily, exhausted by everything. "Yeah? And what's

that, kid?"

She extended her hands to him, scooting closer. Hesitantly, Hopper glanced at her open palms and then back to her face, eyebrows furrowed. With a sad smile she tapped his hands with hers and he felt like this was some kind of childish game he saw girls playing back in school.

Rolling his eyes, he sighed and pushed his hands out toward her. Was this some kind of self-help yoga crap? Because he wasn't having it.

Julie took a breath and put her mind frame to something calming. She pictured her time at Cocoa Beach with her sister, waking up early morning and running across the cool sand to watch the sunrise. It had been a last minute spring break drive her sister's freshman year at university and it took forever to convince her to go. These memories were often what she went back to for her calming space.

Hopper stared as Julie sat with her eyes closed, looking focused. When her fingers reached out to pull at his hand Hop stilled. Warm hands enveloped his and he couldn't help but be nervous at the contact. Last time was such a painful experience he didn't want to feel anything.

But then his mind changed when he felt the instant calm reach his fingertips. The sensation spread up his arms and an instant chill chased down his spine. He couldn't help the moan that left him, a shaky breath following. Flashes of Julie's memories played through his mind like he was watching an old film. Sand, gentle waves on a body of water that went as far as the eye could see. He could feel the heat, could feel the happiness bubbling in Julie's chest, saw the glances she was sending her laughing sister, her sun kissed body floating on the clear water...

Hop almost felt like he was intruding on a personal moment but he soon realized he craved the comfort and so he leaned into it, leaving his reckless thoughts behind.

"Jim," Julie called in the present moment but it sounded far away. "Relax into it," he felt her grip on his fingers tighten.

It was then that his mind did the most curious thing, crafting him into the scene: him lying in a hammock, drink in hand...calm.

Clinging to that, he felt the tension in his shoulders lessen, the pressure in his temples fade.

"Jules?" Jim's voice came out sleepy almost, gruff, deep in her ears. She blushed. He could feel her fading.

"I can't much longer, Jim...I'm sorry."

This worried him and he wanted to pull away from the memory, leave that beach and come to on the porch to make sure she was okay. Julie pushed more power toward him and that calm resonated in his brain once again but her fingers lessened their grip.

The memory was ripped from him so suddenly; he took a sharp intake of breath as he blinked hard. When he saw Julie on the porch she looked pale and her nose was bleeding again.

"You okay?" he asked in a rush, feeling like he'd taken a power nap and was trying to shake the sleep from his limbs.

"M'fine," she hummed. "Lightheaded, but I'm alright. Did that help?"

Hop almost laughed out loud. Here she was wiping blood from her nose and asking if *he* was alright?

"Yeah...yeah, it did." It wasn't taking him long to see how helpful her powers could be.

"I'm still working on that, actually. That was the last thing that..." she paused, looked up at him and his expression urged her to continue. "It was the last thing that Brenner and I worked on before I got out."

Hop didn't want to volunteer as lab rat, but if he got to feel that way again he sure as shit might consider it. It was like downing a case of beer to get that floating feeling. Julie looked exhausted as she leaned back against the porch rail.

"That's...it's pretty amazing, Jules."

She closed her eyes, a smile forming on her lips. "Mmm, thanks Jim." She could stay here all day if he would let her, but Jane was coming soon and she didn't want to intrude. "I have a shift at the coffee shop later. Do you mind taking me back?"

Hopper shook his head though she couldn't see with her eyes closed. "No problem. I'll get my keys."

Julie didn't follow him inside like she planned to. Her body felt extremely weak. She'd never given two different memories within a half hour of each other. It felt like weights were attached to her arms and head.

Only a few minutes had passed, she'd assumed, but Jim came back on the porch, the door slam startling her.

"Thank you," she said as he handed her purse over. Standing slowly, she leaned against the porch rail and took a deep breath. A few steps off the porch and she almost felt like she was on the verge of collapse.

"Hey, hey..." Jim's voice was behind her, hands catching her before she fell. She clung to his arms, breathing strained. "What the Hell? I thought you were fine."

"I'm *fine*, Hop." So she only used that name when she was irritated with him. Noted, he thought. "I just tried to de-stress you, cut out the worrying."

"Oh, yeah, 'cause that's easy..."

Julie pulled away gently and was determined to get to his Blazer by herself, which she did.

Stubborn woman, Hop thought.

9. Conclave

The day had been shit, honestly. Starting with Jane slamming doors and screeching Hopper knew it wasn't going to get any better. And then shit hit the fan with Mr. Mercer down the street having a heart attack and his wife committing suicide within the hour...

Days like this were heavy on Jim. He felt like he was expected to stay in the hospital to see if Mrs. Mercer would survive the pills she downed, but he just couldn't do it. Hospital waiting rooms were not good for him; he couldn't stomach it anymore.

So he put Callahan on it and pushed his way out of those doors to the parking lot like his life depended on it.

Fuck, he needed a drink...

Jane wasn't answering on the Ham radio and it didn't really surprise him but a part of him just wanted to be there. He picked up some whiskey on his way home, grabbed some rotisserie chicken for dinner, and headed to the cabin.

He knew he should have gone back to work to do paperwork and Flo would probably be pissed. None of that mattered as soon as he stepped up to the front door. As he placed the key in the knob he noticed it was unlocked. Slipping his gun out of its holster he set the food and whiskey on the table inside.

"Jane?" he asked tentatively. No response. "El!"

Nothing looked awry as he searched the house, but one thing was sure: Jane was not there.

He felt pressure in his chest, felt like the walls were caving in. She hadn't left a note on the fridge to communicate like they sometimes did. He hadn't marked anything on the calendar noting that she was going to be out with one of her friends.

He ran out the door to check the woods though he knew she wouldn't be there.

"Kid!" he called to the nothingness and heard it echo back.

Frantically, he rushed back inside to pick up the phone and dial Karen Wheeler.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Hopper. Is Jane there?"

"No...why? Is everything okay?"

"Where's Mike?" Hopper ignored her question. He shouldn't have called – she was such a gossip – but he figured Jane would be with Mike if anyone.

"At Dustin's. Hopper-"

He hung up at that, dialing Joyce next.

No one answered and Jim just about ripped the phone off the wall.

Quick steps led him to his Blazer and he peeled out of there and back to the main road. Hopper's mind raced to the most painful possibilities but he tried to reign in his worries.

Maybe she was with the boys playing some bullshit game and forgot to let him know or she'd been trying to call and needed picked up from somewhere.

Or maybe Brenner was alive and came for her. Maybe Julie brought him here and his assumption was right all along. Maybe this was some elaborate ruse; those memories she'd given him weren't really what had happened. Maybe Julie and Brenner were working together. That or someone else from the facility. Now that Julie knew where Hopper's cabin was...kinda. Was she faking being drunk the other night? Had she played him?

His knuckles were white from gripping the steering wheel as he drove to Claudia Henderson's place.

He'd been speeding, contemplating calling Callahan or something to ask if they'd gotten any reports of a little girl running around or a

blue Sedan...

When he pulled up to Dustin's in a rush he rapped on the door, tempted to just break it down.

"Jesus, I'm coming...hold your horses!" came Dustin's voice. He opened looking stunned. "Oh, Chief!"

"Where is she?"

"My mom? She's not here right now...is that..." at this, Hopper barged in. "Oh...okay."

Hopper looked around only to find Mike and Lucas sitting in the living room.

"Where is El?" Hopper asked Mike, staring him dead in the eye.

"What? She's missing!?" Mike jumped to his feet, startled and pale. "When did you see her last?"

"This morning. You?"

"After school. My dad took her home."

"Were you there?"

"Yes."

"And she went inside?" his voice was booming in the small area.

"Yes," Mike nodded. "She wasn't there just now?"

"No." Hopper ran a hand down his face. "Look, call Will. Call whoever. Did she say anything to you about tonight?"

Mike shook his head sadly.

"She said you fought this morning," Dustin offered. "Maybe she took off?"

Hopper glared at the boy, stepping closer to him.

"I'm going to find her. And if you know where she is and you're covering for her...so help me."

He left with a slam of the door.

So that went worse than he expected. They had to know where she was, he was convinced.

Speeding once again, he stopped at the arcade to make sure she wasn't there then swung by Melvald's. Joyce was working and upon seeing the look on Hopper's face she gasped.

"What happened?"

"Jane. She's gone."

"*What!?* Hop..."

"Those boys have to know *somethin'!*"

"Want me to call Will? I know he'll tell me."

"Sure, yeah." Hopper felt defeated at this point, having checked in the expected places. "I'll be next door. Come get me if Will knows."

Hopper stormed out of the store and went stomping over to the coffee shop.

Julie was about to greet him as soon as she heard the bell but she hesitated judging by the look on his face. Jim was radiating rage.

"We gotta talk," he said.

Julie gave a look to her coworker and nodded, leading Jim to the back exit.

"What's going on?"

"I could ask you the same fucking thing, Julie. You brought them here, didn't you?"

She was genuinely confused. "Them? Who?"

Jim's eyes darkened as he looked pointedly at her. "Don't tell me you can't fucking *read it from me*," he spoke through clenched teeth. It was then that Julie finally dug into his thoughts.

"Jane's gone and you think I have something to do with it," her voice rose.

Hopper leaned against the brick of the building, pulled out a cigarette and lit it.

"I don't know what to think anymore, but I know that you were over just the other day and now Jane is gone. Adds up in my mind."

Julie pushed Jim's shoulder, trying to make a skin connection but Jim swatted her arm away, pushed her back. Anger crossed her face and she stepped even closer, pushing passed his defensiveness and pressing her fingers to his neck. She shared her memory of this morning: getting called into an early shift because someone called off and having to rush in before opening.

She pushed off of him harshly, wiping the blood from her nose.

"But I bet you don't believe me, think I'm faking my memories, huh? God, Jim...what else is it gonna take for you to trust me?"

Jim blinked through the fog, inhaled sharply then exhaled the smoke.

He sank down to the concrete below him, unblinking. He was stuck, he didn't know where else to look for her.

"I don't know what to think anymore, okay!?" his voice boomed. Silence befell both of them for a moment. "Fuck, Jules..." he hung his head, let the ashes burn his fingers before tapping them off.

Julie felt bad for the outburst but she didn't want Jim thinking she was still tangled in the web of the facility. Those people had done a number on her and her family. She'd rather die than be associated with them again.

"I understand the accusation, Jim. I do. Just...trust me on this one. I'm not involved." At her words Jim still didn't look up. "Let me see if there's anything I can do..."

Julie closed her eyes, focusing.

"What?" Jim interrupted and she lost it for a second.

Ignoring him, she regained her focus and let her senses run on overdrive. She felt everything – from the breeze to the rush of the passing cars a mile down the road to the busy people talking as they left Melvald's. Not to mention how loud Jim's thoughts were, how his heart raced, how much he ached. Yet no sign of Jane.

"Fuck," she sighed. "I can't get a good reading." She ignored Jim's thoughts running through her mind.

Hopper shook her off; reminded of the time they were drinking at her father's cabin and playing around with her senses and abilities. Things seemed so much lighter then.

"Can't stay in one place too long," he groaned, sitting up and puffing on his cigarette again. "Gotta get moving."

"Let me know what I can do to help," she offered before thinking about it. Was she allowed to help him? Would this be the time he let her step in and meet Jane?

Jim was silent as he rounded the building and went to his Blazer.

...

It'd been hours since Jim payed her a visit at the coffee shop and she hadn't heard anything from him since. She was sure he was losing his mind at the moment but she wasn't exactly sure how to help.

She'd been in her head the whole drive home and it was always amazing to her when she ended up exactly where she needed to be simply by muscle memory.

Climbing the steps to her porch Julie startled when she felt someone watching her.

There, sitting on the patio furniture, was the young girl from Jim's memories: Jane...Eleven.

Julie was frozen for a moment. What was she supposed to say? All this time wanting to meet her and suddenly she was lost for words.

She felt like she was trying to comfort a startled cat – like Jane would take off again. But she got the sense that Jane had planned this all along, wasn't out running around town – she'd been waiting here all day.

"Would you like to come in?" was all she could muster.

Jane nodded sternly, eyes curious but she could tell she was guarded.

As she stepped closer and Julie could see her in the moonlight, memories flooded to her mind. Julie had to hold onto the doorframe simply to stand upright.

Jane's memories were screaming of the facility. Of Brenner – 'Papa' – keeping her close and guarded. His secret weapon. His special treasure.

The image of Brenner in her head once again brought her back to her own thoughts – of Brenner with a blood-covered forehead from where she smashed it against the steering wheel. Memories of how eager he was to get out of the facility – just the two of them.

Forcing herself out of her thoughts Julie unlocked the door and let the girl in.

...

Having her in the same room felt like a long-awaited moment, yet this circumstance was not how Julie assumed it would be.

"I...know we met before, but...I feel like it wasn't a real introduction," Julie stated, sitting down at the table with her. She pulled her sleeve up and showed Jane her '017' mark on her wrist. "I'm Julie."

Jane stared for a long while and then glanced up at her. Extending her arm as well, she revealed her '011' mark. "Jane," she said.

"Jane, I'm...I'm going to be honest, I have been wanting to meet you

and I'm glad this finally happened but...Jim has been looking for you. He's worried sick."

"I know."

"And you don't care?" she asked softly. Jane hid her reaction, looking away. "I'm going to call him, okay? We can talk but I don't want him worrying anymore now that we know you're safe."

Jane didn't protest. Not when she got up or when she picked up the phone and dialed, and not when it rang.

Answering machine.

"Hey, Jim. It's Julie. I got home from work and...Jane was sitting on my porch. I...I'm unsure where you are but I hope you get this soon." She hung up. Awkwardly sitting back down in the room with Jane, she sighed. The tension in the room was overwhelming. "What questions do you have?" Julie found herself saying without thinking. Wouldn't Jim get pissed if he found out?

"A lot."

"Okay," Julie spoke calmly. "Let's start at the beginning..."

...

Most of what Jane wanted to know had to do with her history – background, how she got to be where she ended up, how long, what experiments. Just when she'd gotten done with the history part she was getting the nerve to talk about the experiments when there were loud footsteps on the porch.

All the talk of Brenner made her mind play tricks on her at first – like she'd been watching a horror movie and was now paranoid – but after taking a breath she sensed Jim. She was still cautious when she opened the door.

Jim's eyes were bloodshot, jaw tense as he clenched it at the sight of her. She stepped aside, letting him in then locking the door behind him.

Jane looked frightened but defiant when he came in.

"You are in *deep*, kid," Jim practically growled. "What the Hell were you thinking?"

"I need to know," Jane snapped. "You wouldn't let me."

Hopper tried not to let it get to him, to let his anger subside but damn it she *ran*.

"I'm trying to protect you!" the anger released anyway.

"From what? The bad men. But she is not the bad men." Jane's statement struck Jim.

"You two have a nice chat? Huh? We're *leaving*." His reaction didn't surprise Julie. Neither did Jane's. She sat perfectly still in her seat. "Now."

And then she did the most curious thing: she scooted a chair across the floor with her mind and used her powers to sit Jim down. Jane wiped the blood from under her nose.

"Listen," she warned then turned her attention back to Julie.

The uprising made Hopper want to freak out on her – yell, cuss, get red-faced, but he knew that was just going to push her away more. It had in the past. He felt deflated. Angry, but deflated.

"What did you tell her?" Jim asked, voice monotone.

Julie still felt the fury radiating from him, but she also felt the defeat he was grappling with.

"I told her what you know about my past, how you helped me when I got out before, and now..." Julie paused. "I was asked about the experiments...what they did on me."

Jim sat silent, arm on the armrest; hand on his cheek, looking unamused.

Without letting him take this from Jane, Julie dove into the

information without another look back to Jim for permission.

Hopper sat silent, stuck in his head about the uprising from Jane.

He'd heard Julie's story before and he remembered most of it from back when he was trying to piece everything together – when he knew nothing about MKUltra or Brenner. Now everything fell into place. Now it was even more painful to hear. Maybe that was why he didn't want them to meet – as if protecting Jane from this information would change anything. From what he knew, Jane was kept relatively safe...sort of. But no surgeries or ripping her apart to piece her back together. Not like Julie. Jane *had* these powers. Julie was some science experiment for them.

Jane still referred to Brenner as 'Papa' the few times she spoke about him when prompted. The anger she felt toward him probably hadn't started until after all of this came out. To her, growing up in the facility had been normal. She didn't know any other versions of 'normal' – had nothing to compare it to until now. Until she dug and realized about her mother – found out the truth.

"And I stayed here because...well, I'm still worried that something might happen. I'm still worried that Brenner isn't done torturing me. That somehow things are going to get bad again. It's been so long since I've had normal." Admitting these things to Jane...Eleven...was so much easier than saying it to someone who hadn't lived it – didn't understand.

Julie was tempted to show her what she'd done to Brenner – how she'd hit his head on the steering wheel and crashed the car – but she knew that Eleven saw him as 'Papa'. Julie couldn't imagine the pain of Eleven's anger turned toward her for hurting her 'Papa' – even if he deserved it.

Jim sat slouched in his chair, eyes narrowed, looking pensive.

"Papa...is...dead," even the way she said it made Julie wonder how torn she felt about that.

Julie wanted to cling to that sentence for dear life, but without having seen it herself she wondered how truthful it was. Brenner was

like a cockroach.

"I hope you're right, Eleven."

...

As Jane and Julie talked, she noticed Jim start to nod off in the chair – head lolling forward on his fist balled up against his cheek only to startle awake again.

She could only imagine how exhausting the day was for him, how emotionally draining.

Jane had a lot of questions about her abilities; how things worked, when it started, what things made her nose bleed – the basics of what Julie's life was at that point. And she found herself asking Jane things too. She got a rundown of the visit she made to Chicago where she met Kali, a summary of the events that took place with the Demogorgon and the Mind Flayer.

Jim leaned forward in the chair, yawning. He ran a hand down his face and leaned his elbows on his knees.

"We gotta go, Jane." His anger had subsided at least an hour ago, Julie noted.

The young girl narrowed her eyes at her guardian, changing from calm to frustrated in a matter of seconds.

"No. Stay."

Jim groaned. "I need *sleep*, kid..."

"I can bring her home," Julie offered to which Jim just stared unblinking. "Or she could stay."

"She's not staying," Jim yawned, trying to sound controlling but it came out pathetic.

"We need to talk," Jane spoke matter-of-fact. "Please."

Hopper could feel the irritation clawing its way up his spine again.

He needed rest after a day like today and this just wasn't gonna cut it. Pick your battles, right? But he didn't feel comfortable leaving Jane here all alone. Not yet.

Yet, pick your battles it was. Hopper yawned, groaning.

"Damn it...*fine*." He huffed back in the chair.

Jane looked proud and smug when she glanced back at Julie.

"I have a spare bed down the hall if you like," Julie mentioned. "If you want to rest while we finish up, that would be fine."

She could tell Jim was debating, but finally sighed as he stood. "Fine," he said in a huff then started down the hall.

...

The meeting was much needed and once they were done talking, Julie felt a mixture of exhaustion and relief. Jane was sweet and the talk made her realize that she craved that understanding from another, that commonality they shared: they'd been through the belly of the beast and they *survived*.

Eleven was drifting off on the couch so Julie figured it was a good time to grab Jim. It was 11:26 already and she felt guilty for the talk lasting that long.

"Jim?" Julie whispered, peeking in the bedroom. The Chief was on top of the bedspread, lying on his belly, arms underneath the pillow. He'd taken off his shirt and slept in a wife beater. Slight snoring was heard and Julie felt guilty for waking him. "Jim," she tried again. Nothing. "Jim..." this time she pressed a hand to his bicep, feeling the warmth of his skin under her palm.

"Hm?" he asked in a groggy voice, turning his head but not opening his eyes.

"It's close to midnight, Jim," she whispered. No response. "You can stay if you like." Again, nothing. "...Is that okay?"

"Hm? Mhm. Yeah..." he turned over to face the opposite wall.

Julie grabbed a blanket for him and draped it over his sleeping form.

Walking back into the living room she woke Jane up to have her sleep in her second spare room.

...

Hopper woke with a start, jolting up in an unfamiliar room. Where the fuck was he?

Oh, shit...right. Julie's.

Shit, he slept there? Jesus. He had to get Jane to school.

The loud footfalls didn't startle Julie – she knew they'd be coming. She couldn't help but smirk at the frazzled man standing in the doorway of her kitchen.

"Where's Jane?" he huffed, glancing around.

"I took her to school," she answered simply. "You're a deep sleeper."

Jim felt his cheeks heat at that. "Yeah," he grumbled, taking a seat at the table.

"I really tried to wake you but you just wouldn't budge," she stood to grab a coffee mug and poured him some. "Jane was gonna be late she said, so I let her borrow clothes and took her myself. I'm sorry if I overstepped..."

Jim's instant reaction was one of irritation. Who did she think she was? Yet...*relief*? He'd get to dodge that bullet of Jane getting pissed and throwing a fit.

Julie placed the steaming mug before him, trying not to look at him in his wife beater.

One sip and Jim felt more content.

"Don't worry about it," he hummed at the taste of the coffee. "Glad you got her there."

Julie couldn't help but feel great after finally meeting Jane. Not to mention her role this morning made her feel needed and important for once.

"You're not late for work, are you?"

Jim groaned at the thought of Flo bitching again.

"*Christ...*" he seethed. "I'm night shift tonight." *Thank God.* "So..." he leveled his eyes at her, lifting the coffee to his lips again after saying, "what'd I miss last night?"

"Oh, you know, we threw a huge party, I let her try wine for the first time...the usual." At this Jim seemed only slightly amused. "We mostly talked about the facility. We had very different experiences."

Hopper couldn't grasp that; they'd talked a little about some things but neither of them were open books. Maybe it was different with someone who had been there.

"Like what?" he tried to sound nonchalant.

Julie took a sip of coffee mostly to give her mind a second. This topic was delicate – to all of them – and she didn't want to step wrong. Jim was clearly tense enough.

"Well, you've...seen some of my experiences, I'm sure your mind can wander to some of the other glorious times."

Jim grunted, leaning back in the chair. He couldn't imagine, not right now, could he stomach it?

"And her?"

Julie stilled, realizing the weight of that question. Eleven hadn't told him. She read the deep despair from his gut; felt the need for information yet the fear of what he'd learn.

"Well...with her not knowing a typical upbringing? Growing up in that facility? She didn't realize how much she missed out on because that was her normal." As she spoke, she could feel the sadness creeping into Jim's chest. "We both got robbed of a really big chunk

of our lives. But...I told her last night: it's not the pieces that matter; it's what we do from here that counts."

Hopper said nothing at first, just swallowed down more coffee and stared out the kitchen window behind her.

"It's my fault she took off yesterday," Jim admitted, running a hand through his hair. "I was so *convinced* that you had something to do with her disappearance – that you'd been lying this whole time, fibbing about these memories and the facility." He paused for a long while. "M'sorry."

Julie nodded slowly at that, taking a breath. She got the feeling that Jim didn't usually apologize for anything. Ever. She let this moment hang in the air for a few beats.

"I get it. It's hard to trust after everything. But, again, Jim...it's about what we do from here."

There, in that kitchen, Hopper had a new understanding of what it could take to start over.

10. Dolor

Starting over was such an interesting notion to Julie. The one 'normal life' concept she had forgotten about during her time in the facility was the idea of happenstance. In the facility everything was pre-planned and she got accustomed to a certain schedule.

In life, things didn't always happen that way and she was remembering that quickly.

A few weeks had passed since she'd first met Jane and the new bond was interesting to her. The kids would swing by the coffee shop once in a while for free drinks – to her boss' dismay. She didn't know if any of the other kids knew about her ability, but they never mentioned anything. Jane would ask for rides over her house sometimes and there were two rare occasions that Jim allowed it and picked her up after his late shifts.

Right when she was getting used to the ordinary days, happenstance showed up on her doorstep.

Well, not *her* doorstep – more like the doorstep of the coffee shop.

Frankie Lister, a 20-something kid strolled into the shop with his head hung low. She'd asked him what he wanted to order then figured she'd also ask him what was wrong.

The comment opened her up to a fifteen minute conversation about how his dad was the owner of the arcade in town where all the kids liked to play. She knew it well, passed it on her way from work and often heard the kids talking about it – hence why they didn't spend every day after school getting cappuccino – they were out at the arcade.

"I'm supposed to be running it and I'm...not very good with money... I'm gonna make us lose the place," he huffed out before taking a long gulp of coffee.

"Lose the place? But it just opened and the kids love it there! You can't close it."

"Well, we're probably going to have to," he sulked in his chair

Julie pondered for a moment, thinking about the kids. They'd be devastated. It was their escape. She felt like they would be so let down, after everything that happened in this town, and now this. They'd think the place was cursed.

"What if I bought you out?" she spoke quickly.

The young man looked up, eyebrows scrunched together. "You have the money?"

"How much?"

He threw out a number and Julie breathed, thinking of what she had hidden at the house from dad's safe. She could swing it, but it was just about all she had in savings. However, if the place did as well as she knew it did, she wouldn't have to worry about money...

So, on a whim, she decided to do it.

It was a whirlwind after that conversation: she went to the bank on her lunch break, met the kid, signed a bunch of paperwork, and met his parents who thanked her for taking this burden off of his plate. Apparently it was a test in responsibility for the young man and he failed. They offered to be a partner in the arcade so she didn't have to spend as much money down – just buy out their son's half.

Julie agreed to that, thrilled that she wasn't taking *as much* of a risk as she'd expected.

On her way back to the coffee shop, she realized she'd have to quit. Cindy would be so upset.

"I'm not upset!" her voice boomed when Julie told her the news. "God, whatever gets you ahead, kid! I only wish I'd been on shift when Frankie came in, I'd buy him out in a heartbeat! You're now sitting on a gold mine."

Julie asked Cindy to stop by after work for a drink together and she sheepishly asked for business advice, which Cindy was glad to give.

...

Days flashed by in a whirl while the Lister family showed her the ropes and expectations as partners in the business. They dished out the responsibilities and gave her time to ask questions. It was surprising how easily things shifted for her and she felt like the pieces were all falling into place finally.

...

"You own *what!?*" Dustin was the first one to freak out when he showed up and she was in Palace Arcade uniform. "Does this mean we get free gameplay? Oh my God...oh my God, I'm not breathing! Not breathing!" he gasped, being overdramatic as usual and falling to the cement at her feet.

"Hey, I just saved your little hangout and you're still asking for more?!" she joked.

"They're not gonna believe this. Wait till they see! No freaking way!"

Julie laughed as she watched him run inside.

...

Julie was wiping down one of the games when the bell greeted a new customer. Jane strolled in, looking determined to find her group that was surrounding Dustin while he played Dragon's Lair.

She hadn't seen Jim in weeks and wondered if he was doing well – asked Jane and everything – and she had given a silent nod. Peeking through the window, she watched as his Blazer sat in the parking lot and he lit up a cigarette before taking off, most likely to work.

She sighed; a tad disappointed that he wasn't coming in. Jane had mentioned that he'd asked where she was since he didn't see her at the coffee shop anymore. If Jane hadn't told him it was only a matter of time before he heard, being Chief and all. If he did have that knowledge he sure didn't go out of his way to come inside...

Which was frustrating to say the least. Jim didn't owe her anything, but she appreciated his visits at the coffee shop – looked forward to

them. Now...?

Had she thought about kissing Jim? Yes, and probably all too often. But the moment she'd met Joyce, she backed off. Maybe there wasn't anything going on between them – maybe there was – Julie hadn't wanted to read into it, but there was *something* there.

Joyce was *nice*. Unlike any other woman she remembered spending time with; in her experience with these things women were often catty. Granted, her experience was with twenty-something-and-under females, not divorced mothers.

Joyce had helped her with the house, gotten her settled, helped her find a job...she could tell why Jim liked her. She was an incredible woman.

And, yeah, maybe she could simply read them with her power, but it felt unnatural – it felt needy and desperate and she was tired of playing that role.

So, sure, Jim's beard was often distracting and the way he'd smirk with that cigarette dangling from his lips...

But this new group of people were all she had at the moment and she wasn't about to let some sexual fantasies ruin her new life.

What'd happened between the two of them before was merely a desperate attempt at *feeling* something – finding comfort in an escape from their histories.

Now, what was she running from?

What was he?

So, as per usual, she buried herself so deep into making her house a home, working constantly, and sleeping alone. She had to admit it was lonely.

But she loved her new job. Even before everything happened at that lab, she loved working with kids. The arcade was the hot spot; Jane's group was there every chance they got and she loved that it allowed her to keep an eye on Jane.

...

This day was always hard on Hopper. He figured Joyce knew. He'd told her the date before, hadn't he? One tipsy night together after they'd gotten Will back the two sat there with a bottle of scotch between them. No wonder she offered to keep Jane for the night after the kids left the arcade. He should have told her no, should have held onto that little girl for dear life instead of letting her sleep over the Byers'. Maybe his mind wouldn't have taken him down a dark road if she were here – if *someone* were here.

Hopper felt cursed. Felt like a black hole. There were times he contemplated going to church, getting someone to cleanse him but the idea sounded foolish to him. Diane had been the religious one, the one to drag him to church to pray for Sara. But God never came through. God took his little girl and, damn it, maybe it had been a punishment for not believing. For showing up to that church without faith, going through the motions when they all knew that he couldn't wrap his mind around a higher power. If there was one, why would they make caskets that small? It wasn't right. But where did believing get Diane? Comfort? Another child? Maybe...

He needed a drink.

One drink turned to two and two turned to several.

Pretty soon his judgment kicked in and he knew he needed to get back home.

He was a little more buzzed than he should have been getting behind that wheel but he opened the window in hopes the night air would wake him up, sober him up. He took side streets, though who was going to pull him over?

'Wait, isn't this Julie's street?' he thought.

Yeah...

Before he could think better of it, he was parking in her driveway.

Fuck, these front porch steps seemed a lot steeper at the moment. With a huff, he rapped his knuckles on her door. Lights were on. She

was still awake. What time was it anyway? It was pitch black outside.

The night seemed to still as he stood there waiting for her. What was he doing?

Leaning his head against the doorframe, he closed his eyes for a second. God, he could sleep right now. He could sleep and never wake up and be sort of okay with that. Things would get taken care of.

Hopper had felt restless since Sara passed – felt like he hadn't had a real night's sleep since then and it all wore on him in this moment standing against the doorframe of a friend's house. What a low, he thought.

When the door opened, Julie looked surprised to see him and he just sent her a sad smirk, eyes closing once again.

"Gotta minute?" he groaned, opening his eyes then standing at full height.

Hopper stumbled on his way through the threshold and he felt Julie's hands on him, holding him up.

Julie had been looking at stats for the arcade when she'd heard a car door. She sensed it was Jim in distress before he knocked. So much sorrow was radiating from him in that moment.

"Jim, are you okay?" she asked as she helped him to the couch.

"No," he answered honestly, a slight laugh evident. "When am I ever?"

He flopped down on the couch with a slight hiccup. "Let me get you some water," she said.

Even drunk, Jim knew better than to argue. Instead he let his head rest against the back of the couch, legs stretched out in front of him, blurry vision staring at the ceiling.

When the water was placed in his hand, Hopper laughed. "Well isn't this familiar?"

Julie smiled softly too despite her concern for Jim. "I'll return the favor. Now drink up."

Hopper downed half of it to her surprise and set the rest down on the end table. Leaning forward he ran his hands down his face and held them there for a second while he breathed. The alcohol didn't help. It hadn't last year or the one before that or...

"Room's spinnin'," he acknowledged.

Julie didn't ask, just let herself in to his mind for a moment and when she saw all of the images of his daughter, she hesitated. The most prominent thought in his mind was the date. The pieces all fell into place then.

She remembered what felt like a lifetime ago when she pressed her hand against his chest and told him how much hurt was coming from him. Things had still been raw then, on any given day, but today especially and she just knew.

Jim sat beside her, hands in his hair, eyes downcast, breathing ragged. Her chest felt hollow and heavy all at the same time. She wished she could take the pain away from him, wished she could bring Sara back.

She didn't know what to say but she started with, "I'm sorry."

The way his eyes scanned her then she felt completely transparent. The look of irritation on his face from her reading him made fear fill her gut. She imagined his rage and she deserved it for prying.

"Me too," he choked out, fingers absentmindedly reaching for Sara's hair tie and coming up empty, tears filling his eyes. "Jules, I just... it..." he spoke shakily, looking away to hide his face.

Pulling her legs up underneath her on the couch she focused her mind to a calming memory but then hesitated when it had to do with family. She wanted to comfort Jim, not push him into a downward spiral.

She started with the woods outside of his cabin, the calm quiet surrounding them. When her fingers fell to his hand, Hopper didn't

even have it in him to deflect. His drunken mind took a bit longer to process but he knew what she was doing. And he craved it.

The thought led him through the woods, wandering until they reached a clearing where a small lake existed. The sound of the birds and the feeling of the sun on him were comforting. A hammock was tied off to the left and in his mind Hopper made his way over there. Before he knew it he was laying in it, eyes closing from exhaustion. It felt relieving to sleep in this part of his mind where this memory resided.

And then a branch snapped and Hopper was instantly alert, glancing around as he waited for some sort of explanation.

"Julie?" he called in his mind, in real existence as well.

"It's fine, Jim, just..."

But the feeling wouldn't leave. Someone had taken her. *Sara. El.* They were gone. He felt it in his mind and it dizzied him.

"Sara? El?!" his voice boomed through the woods, that desperation showing its ugly head once again.

He pulled away from her hand, tears filling up in his eyes.

Julie grabbed a tissue, wiped the blood from under her nose, stared at Jim as he hyperventilated.

"I'm sorry if that didn't..." she started.

"-It's fine. You..." he huffed out in a shaky voice. "Damn it..."

Julie took the time to sit with him in silence, let him process through whatever he had to. She would periodically hand him more of the water to drink and he'd silently take it then hand it back. She felt like she was urging a stray cat to trust her.

She turned on the TV, tried to distract him in this way. It sort of worked – he was staring at the screen – but she could tell he was in his head. Soon, though, his eyes started fluttering closed. He'd fall asleep; head would loll forward, and then wake right back up again.

"You can get some rest, Jim," she urged softly.

He shook his head, kept his eyes closed. "Just...stay." Without saying anything more, they settled into another comfortable silence. Julie swore he was sleeping but he said, "Couldn't be alone tonight" and her heart broke.

"I'm glad you found your way here."

A half hour passed and Jim's head was against the back of the couch, his breathing even. Julie glanced at him and couldn't help but stare, admiring the big man who looked so peaceful when he slept. She wanted to touch his face, kiss his forehead, make things better, but she thought better of it.

Jim was still pretty shitfaced even an hour later when he'd woken up, finished more water, and she helped him stumble to the bathroom.

Alone in the bathroom, Hopper splashed cold water on his face to wake him up, sober him, but all he kept thinking about was the sound of the flat line when his little girl was no longer with him.

He vomited then and it made him sicker to know that Julie was the one who got to witness this from him. He should've gone home. Idiot.

"M'fine," he called before she could even ask. God, how much had he had tonight?

The room was still spinning and it made his stomach lurch again. Poor Julie had just been trying to comfort him with that vision thing, but his mind brought about a sound – a single sound – a female scream – and he spiraled.

God, what was wrong with him?

The door opened behind him which made this whole thing even worse. He couldn't stop his stomach from convulsing as he dry heaved over the toilet. Julie pressed her hand to his back, grabbing him a washcloth and wetting it while rubbing her empty hand along the length of his back to comfort him.

What a fucking embarrassment he was, he thought.

...

Julie managed to get him into bed after forcing him to take off his shirt so she could wash the vomit off of it.

He stayed in the guest room he'd been in last time he stayed at the house. She'd seen Joyce pick up Jane tonight from the arcade so she assumed she was taken care of.

After throwing his shirt in the laundry, she came back up to check on him. Quietly peeking in the room, she saw his back turned to the door, saw the shake of his shoulders, the quick gasps leaving his lungs, and recognized the sorrow Jim was feeling. Not wanting to watch the man break down, she turned and went back to her room to give him some privacy.

She didn't sleep well that night, worried that he would vomit and choke on it. Multiple times she went to check on him with fear bubbling inside of her. Each time he was alright – either sleeping or crying quietly and it broke her to see. There was nothing she could do. She knew how private he was and she was grateful that for whatever reason fate brought him to her doorstep tonight. Imagining him alone with the weight of this day was suffocating her.

Closing her eyes, she stood against the door to the guest room and snuck herself into his memories: a little girl hooked up to all kinds of machines, pretty features, bald, her hair tie on his wrist. She saw him reading to her, kissing the top of her head; saw the broken look on his face when that flat line was heard.

Julie stood there covering her mouth, trying not to make a sound to wake him. She got brave, wondering if she could leech the memory from him for the time being, wondering if she could shoulder the burden for a bit in the way that Brenner had taught her. She'd never tried it with something negative, but she wanted him to get some rest.

Taking tentative steps forward, she sat down on the edge of the bed then softly pressed her hand to Jim's arm. He slowly stirred, a groan leaving his mouth when he blinked at her.

"What're you-" he inhaled sharply when he felt a tingling sensation in his fingertips.

Julie inhaled too, holding her breath as she gritted her teeth in hopes to pull the pain from him.

Hopper felt instant ease, his once clouded mind was cleared and he almost felt confused at what had been weighing him down. Julie held back the tears as the memory flooded her mind, feeling what Jim had been carrying with him.

In a last-ditch effort, she tried to shove the calming memory to him – the one from weeks ago – the beach. It was a placeholder. The memory of his daughter wasn't gone from him, but the thought of it currently being in his mind was. Brenner had worked on it with Julie for weeks – his prize manipulation – teaching how to force a distraction on someone. She hated doing it, hated the feeling it left her with for hours, hated manipulating people like that. Sure, her other mind tricks manipulated things and forced them to reveal personal thoughts, but this was different entirely: most people had no clue what she could do so peeking in on their thoughts didn't change their patterns. This, however, altered their thinking completely.

She remembered when she'd leeched a memory from Brenner and put his thoughts on another track – he hadn't forgotten it, just couldn't remember what he'd been thinking about at the time. It was scary to her what she could do and she almost shielded herself away from it. Yet the effects wore off hours later and Brenner remembered their training, assuming it went well since he couldn't remember.

Watching the awful scenes of Sara her nose started bleeding so she backed off, ducked out of the room to wipe her nose and hide her sobs.

There was an ache in her chest for Jim Hopper.

...

Hopper assumed he knew what happened. After he managed to get a few hours of uninterrupted sleep, he laid there staring at the ceiling and piecing last night together. Instant relief after Julie had woken

him up, pushed a half-hearted beach memory into his mind before completely bolting from the room.

She'd leeched it from him. He could remember what happened, but there was a hole – as if he knew what to be mourning, but his mind wouldn't let him cry anymore, couldn't be devastated anymore. He felt like he could put himself back together and handle it another day.

Julie had washed and dried his shirt, folded it and placed it on the nightstand while he slept. He dressed, washed his face, felt the ache in his gut from lack of food, and wandered into the kitchen.

Leaning against the doorway he watched Julie. She sat on the counter beside the stove, poking a spatula aimlessly at the toast while sipping her coffee.

Her eyes were bloodshot, a little swollen as if she'd been crying. He crossed his arms as he made his way over to her. She smiled but it didn't reach her eyes.

"I know what you did last night," he sighed, leaning against the counter opposite her. "You...hid the memory from me...how?"

Turning to the pot, she filled up a coffee mug for Jim then handed it over to him, returning to the French toast moments later.

"Brenner worked on it with me. I don't..." she let out a shaky breath. "I don't like to."

She had tears in her eyes when she looked back at him. It crushed him.

"Then why?" he was about to start yelling but reeled it back in for the sake of his own head.

Julie shook her head. "I couldn't see you like that, Jim. I...you do that every year, from what I've seen in your thoughts and...I'm sorry. It's personal to you and I shouldn't have done that, I get it if you're mad, but I just..." a small sob left her and she slammed down the coffee mug, shifted to slide off the counter.

When she landed inches from Jim, he reached out awkwardly, set his mug down too, and pulled her body into his.

She fought it for a minute but soon broke down in his arms, burying her head in his chest. Hopper pressed his chin to the top of her head, wanted to cry too at the thought of her carrying the weight of the loss of his child – but no tears came.

"How long will you feel like this?" he managed after a few minutes

She shrugged. "It comes and goes."

Jim nodded at that. "You didn't have to -" he sighed, stopping himself from getting angry. "Thank you."

Jim's stomach growled

Julie pulled away, cheeks red from embarrassment of being so close to him in that moment. She focused on the food and plated it for him, handing it over so he could sit down and eat.

She'd made bacon and eggs too and placed the food on the table for him as well.

"You keep cooking like this I'm making this a habit," Jim said, mouth full.

She pushed his shoulder as she passed him.

"You bastard."